

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The man, on the left, has light brown hair and is wearing a dark, ornate jacket over a white shirt. The woman, on the right, has dark hair styled in a bun and is wearing a vibrant red, off-the-shoulder dress. They are in a room with a brick fireplace. Above the mantel is a large, ornate mirror reflecting a warm, glowing light. The mantel is decorated with a garland of greenery and red berries. To the right, a Christmas tree is visible, adorned with lights and ornaments. In the foreground, a small bell sits on a wooden surface. The overall atmosphere is warm and festive.

ELLIE ST. CLAIR

A MATCH
MADE AT
CHRISTMAS

A Match Made at Christmas

Ellie St. Clair



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Prologue

Lady Catherine Walsingham delicately stirred a touch of cream into her tea, the spoon clinking against the side of the cup. Mrs. Mary Northrup, currently sitting across from her on the Louis XV giltwood settee which matched the new Ridgway tea set — by design, not by accident — had already admired the hand-painted crimson and cobalt blue floral design, as she knew she had been expected to.

“Do tell me, Mrs. Northrup, how is your daughter?”

“My daughter?” Mrs. Northrup took a sip of her tea to give herself time to formulate her response. Lady Walsingham never did anything without a reason. Everything in her life was deliberately, carefully planned and executed. Mrs. Northrup felt herself fortunate to consider the countess as one of her closest friends, not only because it raised Mrs. Northrup’s own position in the community, but because she had learned over time to be equally purposeful in her answers to Lady Walsingham’s questions. There would be a reason as to why she was asking about her daughter.

She tilted her head innocently. “Which one?”

As if there was a true question to which she might be referring.

“Why, Miss Ivy Northrup of course,” Lady Walsingham said with a tinkling laugh before taking a sip of the fine black tea she prided herself on serving. “Is there any other to discuss?”

“Well...” Mrs. Northrup shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “There is Francine. She just had her second child — another son. And then there is Thomas. My son of course, not my daughter, but he was just named vicar in Spalding. And then there is Janice. She—”

“That is so lovely to hear, Mrs. Northrup,” Lady Walsingham said, her smile somehow lessening the sting of the interruption. “Miss Northrup, such a lovely young lady, she must be... hmm, what is it now — six and twenty?”

Mrs. Northrup swallowed uncomfortably. She was not typically one to keep her thoughts to herself, except when she was conversing with a woman such as Lady Walsingham. Mr. Northrup might be a squire and a magistrate, but they were still gentry. And gentry did not dispute the words of one such as a countess.

“She is,” Mrs. Northrup said with a nod, before placing her tea cup back on the table and then folding her hands in her lap in what she hoped seemed an unassuming manner. She might not be able to say exactly what was on her mind, but she could be equally as coy as Lady Walsingham. “And how is your Everett? It has been so long since I have seen him.”

She smiled as modestly as she could, although she didn’t miss the flash in Lady Walsingham’s eyes when she recognized exactly what she was doing.

“Yes, Everett has always been keen to forge his own path,” Lady Walsingham said, the corner of her lips turning up in that icy polite manner so common to those of her station. Mrs. Northrup would have snorted were she talking to anyone else, for his “own path” was, as far as she knew, not exactly that which was expected of the second son of an earl. “While he has made a few wrong turns in the past, he has finished his studies and is making a name for himself as a barrister in London.”

“A barrister?” Mrs. Northrup raised a brow. She had heard he had returned to finish his studies but hadn’t known of his profession. Lord and Lady Walsingham must be pleased. “How lovely. Has he married?”

Lady Walsingham’s pale, elegant cheeks under slightly greying dark hair colored ever so slightly, true pain covering her face for a moment. “Not as of yet.”

“That is unfortunate, although I understand, of course,” Mrs. Northrup said, suddenly feeling rather guilty for bringing it up, considering her own daughter didn’t seem to be of any mind to follow down the marriage path. “If only our children would listen to their mothers.”

“If only,” Lady Walsingham said, allowing a rather vulnerable sigh to escape.

“Is he coming home for Christmas?” Mrs. Northrup asked, recognizing that she was slightly pushing the limit, as she knew — as did everyone else — that Everett Pine had not been home in years, nor would he likely ever be again.

“Not that I am aware,” Lady Walsingham said, her lids covering the brilliant blue of her eyes for a moment as she looked down, moving the untouched cakes around on her plate. “Speaking of Christmas, is your family still attending our house party?”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” Mrs. Northrup returned earnestly, which was completely the truth — it was one of the highlights of the year. She hesitated before asking her next question but couldn’t help herself. She had known Lady Walsingham long enough that she hoped she would forgive her impertinence. The countess had overlooked a

few of her faults in the past for, if nothing else, Lady Walsingham enjoyed the opportunity to arrange visits with someone who lived within a respectable distance. "I don't suppose there will be any eligible young gentlemen in attendance for my Ivy?"

Lady Walsingham pursed her lips. "There may be one or two of Lord Lakeland's friends, but I am not entirely certain. My son has not provided me with his invitation list as of yet."

Mrs. Northrup had to hold back her shiver. Lord Lakeland, Lady Walsingham's eldest son, was not exactly the kind of gentleman she knew her Ivy would be drawn to, and if his friends were anything like the man he was, Mrs. Northrup wouldn't want them for her daughter, no matter their title.

"It is too bad your Everett isn't coming," Mrs. Northrup mused aloud with a sigh. "As much as I hate to say it, a man like him is probably one of the few who would catch Ivy's eye."

"A man like him?" Lady Walsingham raised a delicate eyebrow.

"Charming, worldly," Mrs. Northrup waved her hand in the air. "Ivy is not a girl — a woman — who is impressed by much, except, perhaps, for a man who can dazzle her with his life experience."

Lady Walsingham paused for a moment, tilting her head to the side, and Mrs. Northrup knew that meant she was thinking — or perhaps, *scheming* might be the better word.

"Perhaps I might have an idea," she said, tapping a finger against her lips. "One that could solve both of our problems."

"Problems?"

"Children who refuse to marry," Lady Walsingham said before her lips began to curl once more, only this time in a smile that one might actually believe to be true. "What do you say about playing a little matchmaker, Mrs. Northrup?"

Mrs. Northrup smiled as her heart jumped. Her daughter, with the son of an earl? No matter how wayward he was, that was more than she could have ever wished for.

"I would love nothing better."

Chapter 1

Everett Pine impatiently tapped his pen on the top of the scarred, white oak desk that had been gifted from the previous tenant — who had been planning to break it apart for scrap wood — as he looked up at the door. Some days he prayed that by staring at it, he could will it to open and allow a client to walk in.

However, wishing brought nothing but dashed hopes, as he had learned in the past, so instead he sighed and returned to the list he was currently devising.

A list of how to grow his business.

Well, begin his business might be a better way to put it.

Unfortunately, the list he could make about why no one was currently entering his business was the longest one he could write. One full of past transgressions, broken promises, and choosing his intuition over his better judgment.

Most young men of his standing would have no issue in creating a client base.

But then most young men who were sons of earls had the backing of their fathers. Most had not disgraced their families and then told their father to take his disappointment and shove it— well, somewhere not altogether pleasing.

Which had all led to his current predicament.

The door opened after a slight knock, evoking a quick bark from the dog at his feet, and Everett lifted his head expectantly, but found it was only the postman who entered and placed a missive on his desk, as Everett had no staff to accept it for him. One letter, apparently, was all that had found its way to his address.

Everett lifted a hand to pay him, but the postman waved him away — telling him that the letter was franked. And there were very few people who would send him a franked letter.

Everett found his letter opener to slice open the seal — and paused when he recognized just whose seal it was. The sword interspersed with the floral design. A seal he knew better than any other. The Walsingham crest. He swallowed his momentary panic, knowing that it could not be his father who was writing him. “It must be from my

mother, Spirit,” he murmured to his dog, who he could have sworn nodded sagely in return. His mother still found it within her heart to reach out to him now and again, saying that no matter what he did, she could never completely cut off her own flesh and blood.

He had always appreciated that about her, despite the impenetrable front that she presented to the world. He still longed for her to simply believe in his word rather than what all assumed, but he would take her love if nothing else.

Everett thumbed open the pages, seeing his mother’s careful, controlled handwriting inside, and he smiled at the fact that she had never changed, and never would.

After sharing with him all of the news of his most well-behaved and properly wed-off brothers and sisters, he came to the last few paragraphs — her plea for him to return for Christmas. He was already mentally composing his refusal when he came to the last line.

“It is most important that you come home this year, Everett, for it just might be our last opportunity to celebrate together.”

He bolted out of his seat, one that only just passed for a chair, so quickly that it fell over, Spirit quickly scrambling out of the way, standing on all fours with ears erect, ready to vanquish whatever foe threatened his master. Which was how the two of them were found when the office door swung open again moments later.

“Ah, Pine, you’re already standing for me, eh? Quite upright of you.”

Everett drummed his fingers on the desk as he looked up at his friend, who was eyeing him with a chuckle from his now crouched position as he had met Spirit near the floor, scratching him behind the ears enthusiastically as the dog’s tail thumped against the desk. Charles Morris had been one of his closest friends since childhood, and Everett could always rely on him to turn the most dire of situations into one of no seriousness at all.

“Have you heard anything from home, Morris?” he asked, dispelling any pleasantries as Charles patted Spirit one last time and then took a seat on the faded floral fabric of the armchair — salvaged like the rest of the office furniture — in front of the desk.

“Home?” Charles frowned. “Just the usual. Crops were good, my sister had another baby, my father’s feeling poorly. Same as the last letter. Nothing worth mentioning.”

“Nothing about my mother?”

“Why would I know anything about your mother?” Suddenly he smiled wickedly. “Unless you mean—”

“Enough, Morris,” Everett said, rolling his eyes, although he couldn’t help but chuckle. “Now is not the time for your sick jokes.”

Charles furrowed his brow as though suddenly taking actual stock

of the situation.

“Is something the matter?”

“I don’t know,” Everett said, running a hand through his hair, which only served to remind him that it was far too long. He could only imagine what his mother would say if she saw it. “There might be. Read this.”

He passed the letter to Charles, pointing to the last paragraph. Charles scratched his temple once he finished, passing the paper back to Everett before placing his hands in his pockets and tossing back his head of sandy brown hair.

“Not sure what to think on that,” he said with a shrug of a shoulder from beneath his worn but respectable jacket. Charles had come to London a few years ago, after Everett had left school. They may be worlds apart in stations in life, but had been fast friends from early childhood, before they could realize just how much difference there was between the two of them — a difference that meant nothing to four-year-old boys and still didn’t to the men they were today. “Could mean something. Could mean nothing.”

“How could it mean nothing?”

“She could just be trying to guilt you into coming home.”

Everett let out a breath, holding onto hope that Charles was right and that was all it was. His mother could be crafty, but she would have to be desperate to concoct a lie like this, if that was truly what it was. It was not as though he had any way to determine it for himself. He most certainly couldn’t write his father, and his siblings were most likely to tell their parents of anything that Everett wrote home to them. No, unfortunately, this was one thing that he simply couldn’t leave to chance.

His mother knew what she was doing. She had left him no other choice.

Everett closed his eyes briefly as he thought of his family’s Christmas house parties and all that came with them — the formal dinners, the services, the stupid games they played — organized party games and those hidden games played between guests.

“Be that as it may,” he said, opening his eyes and looking at his friend. “Do you have any plans this Christmas?”

Charles’ eyes widened. “Surely you can’t mean—”

“I have to.”

“But think of the fun we could have in London,” Charles argued, leaning forward and placing his hands on the desk, not caring about the formerly carefully piled sheafs of paper that flew from it when he did so. “At least in London, there are those who just celebrate at Christmas, who don’t spend the holiday kneeling in a pew. If you go home—”

“Would you come?”

Charles studied him with more seriousness than he usually approached anything. “You want *me*, the son of the apothecary, to come to a Christmas party at the Earl of Walsingham’s?”

“You will be more welcome than I will be, trust me in that,” Everett said wryly. “At least by my father.”

“Well, your mother asked you home. That’s got to count for something, does it not?”

“I suppose,” Everett said, but he couldn’t help the uneasy feeling roiling through his stomach. Spirit must have sensed his unease, for he trotted toward him and butted his nose against his leg.

“You’re already all but estranged from the man,” Charles said, squinting his eyes as he peered out the dirty window where the wind was beginning to toss around passersby and items in the street, and Everett could tell that his friend’s wandering attention was already waning. “What worse could happen?”

Everett set his chin grimly. “What worse, indeed?”

Somehow, he had the feeling that he was about to find out.

* * *

IVY NORTHRUP STARED out the window, hoping for something — anything — to come over the horizon. Something to break up the grayness of the day, that would promise novelty or excitement. Something other than the same old ordinary that came day after day.

But, of course, there was nothing out there but the wind blowing the branches of the bare trees, with the greenery of spring nowhere in sight.

She turned around to the unchanged sitting room. The same matching walnut sofas, striped with pine green leaves scattered across the cream fabric. The same mahogany table between them, atop the hunter green and cream carpet, patterned by diamonds. The same shelving lining the walls, housing the same books that had been there for years, books that she had already read multiple times.

The only item of interest in the room was what covered the table — her silk, her shuttles, her purse frames.

Ivy picked up her current project, critically eyeing the stocking purse she was creating for her father. She wondered if her family would ever tire of the same Christmas gifts from her year after year. She knew her work was well done, but a woman could only have so many reticules and a man only so many purses.

But Ivy was not, unfortunately, a woman of many talents. She only had one, so she would continue to do it to the best of her ability and hope that her family would forgive her for the monotony.

At the rate her brothers and sisters were producing children, however, her list of gift recipients grew year after year, and she wondered if she would reach a point where she could no longer keep up.

“Ivy, there you are!”

Why did her mother look so keen? There was an edge of excitement to her, and Ivy stood with some suspicion. There were usually only two things that brought her mother such eagerness — a prospective marriage or a forthcoming grandchild.

“Mother,” she greeted her before tilting her head and eyeing her. “You’re not here to tell me that you have invited some young man and his mother to tea, are you?”

“Of course not!” her mother said, placing a hand over her heart as though insulted that Ivy would think such a thing — even though she had done just that multiple times over the past months. “It is nothing of the sort.”

“Is Francine or Janice pregnant again?”

“No! Or at least, not that I am aware of. Besides, Francine just had the baby a month ago.”

“Thomas, then?”

“Ivy, you know Susan is already expecting.”

“Right, sorry. I forgot.”

“Well, easy to do sometimes, I suppose.” Her mother looked around the room. “What have you been doing?”

“Nothing,” Ivy said, practically throwing herself backward onto the sofa behind her. “Nothing at all. For there isn’t anything to be doing.”

“I see you have your netting out.”

“I do. Have to prepare for Christmas.”

“Of course. You make such beautiful reticules and the like.”

Ivy nodded and then pushed herself up on her elbows and narrowed her eyes at her mother. “Is there something you would like to share with me?”

“There is,” her mother said, taking the chair from Ivy. “It’s about Christmastide.”

“Oh?” Ivy said, raising an eyebrow. “Are we going anywhere?”

She tried not to let any hope invade. It had been quite some time since they had been outside the Peterborough area. She had tried to convince her parents that they were long past due for a holiday, but her father was far too committed to his duties as magistrate. He seemed to think that if he left, even for a short time, the entire town would fall apart. Ivy didn’t have it within her to tell him that they had been fine before him and would be fine afterward.

“No, unfortunately not,” her mother said with a slight frown, for she was nearly as keen as Ivy to go beyond the borders of the town.

She brightened, however, before opening her mouth again. "We have been invited to the Walsingham house party."

"Oh," Ivy said now, then saw her mother's consternation at the disappointment in her tone. "I see." She tried to smile politely to show some excitement, but it was rather difficult when there was none forthcoming.

Sure, the house party might dispel her boredom for a bit. It had at one point in time. But now she found that as all the men and women her age had been married off, it had become far less interesting. All of the flirting was done surreptitiously and all of the affairs behind closed doors. Ivy herself had no interest in even an exchange of flirtatious words with a married man — or even worse, one of Lord Lakeland's friends, and most of them were so boring that she had no wish to converse with them anyway.

Which left her sitting there, dreadfully disinterested as she listened to all of the women speaking of their children's first steps and ailments, or who in town was going to be married soon or who was expecting again. She felt like a terrible person for even thinking so, but she couldn't change how she felt.

"Are you not excited?"

"Well, this is certainly not the first time we have been invited," Ivy said slowly. "It has proven to be... somewhat entertaining in the past."

"Of course," her mother gushed. "And one never knows just who might be in attendance."

"I find that the guests are usually quite similar from year to year, and many of them are far above us in station — some who find themselves so high that they see no reason to want to spend much time talking to the likes of us," Ivy said before leaning forward, trying to determine just what her mother might be driving at. "Is there a reason to believe it might be different this year?"

"No reason," her mother said, shrugging a shoulder in what Ivy was sure was supposed to be nonchalance. "One just never knows."

"No," Ivy said, narrowing her eyes. "One never does."

The wind was swirling rather viciously when the Northrup carriage pulled up in front of Cedarworth Manor. The white brick façade rose into the air, the perfect setting of an ice castle in the midst of the threat of snow that whirled around them.

Ivy shivered, even though she had hot stones at her feet and a fur blanket over her legs. She looked across the carriage to the other seat to find that her mother seemed equally as miserable, although her face brightened somewhat when she saw that they had arrived.

It had not been an extremely long drive, but it was cold and it was wet and, while usually wishing herself to be anywhere *but* home, Ivy couldn't deny that the armchair in front of the warm, dry fireplace with a hot tea in hand would be rather lovely at the moment.

"Here we are," her father said, obviously attempting to deny the misery that surrounded them from both within the carriage and without. "Now, remember, Ivy, this is where important connections are made. You never know what kind of young gentlemen will be present at such a house party."

"Oh, I am aware," Ivy said, trying to keep the ire from her tone. She knew exactly the kind of gentlemen. Gentlemen who thought they would have a good time with the daughter of the local gentry and then return to their own class for a woman with whom they would like to settle down and have bear their children. Not that Ivy wanted to be one of *those* women — but neither did she aspire to be the other woman, the one who was left behind and forgotten about.

"That's a good girl," her father said, patting her on the knee, obviously not understanding her chagrin. Her mother, who was far more perceptive, eyed her knowingly but said nothing, not wanting to cause an argument between the pair of them if it wasn't warranted. Ivy loved her father, but her mother often said the two of them were far too much alike — too stubborn, too headstrong — for them to ever truly get along.

Besides, her father had ideas for what was the right and proper way for a young woman to live her life — and aspirations of finding her own way out of Peterborough in the hopes of seeing more of the

world certainly wouldn't be one of them.

For what chance was there for a young, unmarried woman to do so? Little to none, unless she could find a well-off relative to accompany, which didn't seem visible within her horizon.

"Well, we best be on our way, then," her father said. "When we turned toward the Manor, there was another carriage approaching in the distance. We should hurry on inside before them."

"Or, we can let them go on ahead," Ivy suggested.

"No, no," her father said, shaking his head, his white mustache following along. "Just because we don't have a title, my dear, does not diminish our importance. Never forget that!"

Her father certainly hadn't allowed it to, but now was not the moment to cause a stir.

He opened the carriage door before the driver had a chance to open it for them, and was already waving Ivy and her mother outside like he was ushering them into the theatre. Ivy motioned for her mother to go first, happy that her father at least remembered to hold out his hand and help his wife down the carriage steps. Ivy followed behind, watching her parents as they began their ascent up the tall, narrowing staircase.

The door to the manor opened and Ivy looked up to see who awaited within — but as she did, her boot hit ice on the bottom step and she went flying forward, reaching her arms out to stop herself but finding nothing but rough gravel meeting her below.

She landed with a thud and tried not to wince as the gravel bit through her gloves and into the skin of her wrists that emerged between them and the sleeves of her cloak and dress.

"Ivy!" Her mother gasped, but before Ivy could even look up, there was the crunch of a boot in the gravel beside her, coming from another direction. She winced as she began to draw her knees up toward her hips, but first that pair of boots came even with her eyeline. They were very large, very polished, and very masculine.

Ivy pushed herself up, needing to, at least, be off the ground so that she could maintain some dignity in front of the new arrival.

When her gaze met his — one that she had to crane her neck back slightly to see — she found that she couldn't say anything at all.

"Need a hand?"

His piercing blue eyes seemed to look right through her, and there was something altogether familiar about them. A lock of dark hair escaped from his hat, and he stared down at her over his near-perfect nose.

"I am fine, thank you," Ivy finally managed, her mind racing. How many years had it been since she had seen him? She had been a girl still, perhaps sixteen, he at least five years older and all too tempting

— although she guessed he hadn't even spared a glance her way. Of course, much had changed in his life since then. Regretfully, nothing had in hers. "It's... *surprising* to see you, Mr. Pine."

His eyebrows raised slightly, and Ivy couldn't tell whether he was more shocked by her response or the fact that she had so readily identified him. It may have been years, but Ivy had not had an opportunity to meet nearly as many people in her life as a man like him would have.

That he was actually home was another mystery altogether. For Everett Pine had not been home — nor welcomed home — since he had left in disgrace.

Disgrace that was well known by all in the Peterborough area, although no one was entirely aware of the circumstances.

"You are looking... older, Miss Northrup."

Ivy couldn't help the laugh that bubbled up in her throat at his obvious rebuttal to her words, and when she heard her mother hiss her name from the few steps ahead, she clapped a hand over her mouth to try to stifle it.

"Old I am, Mr. Pine."

"Someone should have helped you from the carriage."

"I should have been watching where I was going."

"Well. Either way, I hope you are not injured."

"Not at all," Ivy said, "although I am freezing. Perhaps we can continue this conversation inside?"

"You go on ahead," he said, waving a hand toward the doorway. "I will be in momentarily."

Ivy wasn't sure if she was correct but she imagined, for a moment, that she caught a wariness in his gaze, and she guessed that he was just as hesitant about attending this house party as she was — if not more. She could hardly wait to learn just why he was here.

She nodded and hurried ahead to join her parents. They were just about to walk in the door when she caught the look on her mother's face. Was she — pleased? No. It couldn't be.

But stranger things had happened at these house parties before.

* * *

"WHO WAS THAT?"

Charles had taken longer to depart from the carriage they had shared from Peterborough. In his pride, Everett had refused his mother's offer of a carriage from London, but he had accepted the ride for the short distance after they disembarked from the stagecoach. Everett had nearly forgotten Charles as he had gazed on after the woman. Charles placed his hands on his hips as he followed Everett's

stare up the steps.

"Ivy Northrup."

"*That* was Ivy Northrup?" Charles said, his eyes widening in disbelief. "Couldn't be. Ivy Northrup is just a girl."

"She was — when we left. But that was years ago. She apparently aged along with the rest of us."

"And aged well," Charles said, his admiration matching Everett's own.

Everett realized that telling a woman she looked old was not exactly a compliment, but it had been true — he remembered her as a girl and now she was a woman. And what a woman she was. He had been pleasantly surprised when she hadn't been insulted by his impromptu words, but had actually seemed to enjoy his remark. He remembered her as a mischievous child, one who never did or said exactly what she was supposed to. Their mothers had been friends for years, and obviously still shared an acquaintance if she was attending this house party. He remembered little Ivy Northrup hiding in the attic and encouraging his sisters to catch creatures in the yard. They had been hesitant but had followed along, until Ivy was invited to behave or no longer join her mother on her visits with the countess.

Everett grinned. Apparently, not much had changed.

"Are you going to stay out here all day with that silly look on your face, or are we going to go inside and out of this ball-freezing cold?" Charles asked, cutting through his memories, and Everett nodded smartly before leading them both toward the front door. The cloth bag in Charles' hand began to move, and Everett took it from him, opening it slightly before peeking in and making a shushing noise.

A sudden thought struck him as he and Charles walked into the unchanged foyer — was Ivy still Miss Northrup or would she have married by now? He shook the thought away. She had arrived with her parents, so must still be single. Why the idea filled him with such warmth he had no idea. He was here to check on the health of his mother and then he would be back to London.

The butler had obviously been expecting their approach, for the door began to open — but stopped halfway when he saw who was approaching.

"Mr. Everett — that is, Mr. Pine," the butler exclaimed, after his mouth had opened and closed a few times as though he was trying to decide just what to say to Everett. "I, ah, that is, we weren't expecting you."

"Well, my mother summoned me here, Barton," Everett said with a wry smile, "so I considered that to be an invitation. She even sent me the carriage."

"Of course, Mr. Pine," Barton said with a strained smile, and

Everett could tell that his butler duties were at war with his allegiance to his father. “We knew the carriage met the stagecoach but didn’t know — no matter. Do come in. And Mr....”

“Morris,” his friend said with a cheery smile. “You don’t remember me? How do you do, Barton?”

“Ah — fine thank you,” Barton said with a nod. “If you don’t mind waiting in the parlor, Mr. Pine, I will speak to the housekeeper about arranging bedrooms for the two of you.”

“I’ll take my old bedroom, if you please,” Everett said, shaking out his cloak, and Barton paled even more, if that was at all possible.

“Ah, yes, about that...” Barton said, tugging at his collar, and Everett realized what was so distressing to the butler.

“They got rid of my room, then, did they?”

“It has been allocated to another guest, my lord,” Barton said, and Everett snorted.

“I’m not a lord, Barton. Never was, never will be.”

“But—”

“It’s fine, Barton. Not your fault. Any room with a fire would be much appreciated. And please, tell my mother I am here?”

“Of course,” Barton said with a nod of his head as he led them into the parlor before he crossed the room and left, shutting the door smartly behind him, effectively trapping the two of them within. The room looked exactly as Everett remembered, with its cobalt blue and crimson furniture. Everett had spent so much of his time recently in rooms with bare walls and equally bare cupboards that he had nearly forgotten the opulence of the home he had been raised in. The parlor walls were covered in gilded paper that set off the fine chandelier hanging from the middle of the room over the elaborately carved table which was surrounded by crimson upholstered chairs.

His gaze held on the chessboard in front of one of the cobalt blue settees, reminding him of the many nights he had played with his father, learning from — and eventually besting — him.

“Will you hold onto Spirit when my mother comes in?” he asked Charles, passing him the bag when he nodded and reached in to pet the furry head.

“As long as he behaves. I must ask before she arrives — are you *sure* that she invited you?” Charles asked skeptically, his brow raised as he tapped his faded black top hat against his leg.

“You read the letter,” Everett said, sending him a scathing look and Charles nodded slowly.

“That I did.”

“Well, this should be an interesting little reunion, then, don’t you think?” Everett said, but then lost all words when a masculine voice he hadn’t heard in years but could remember as though it had been

just yesterday cut through the room.

“What are you doing here?”

Everett caught Charles’ look of terror, and in any other circumstance, he would have laughed at how badly it seemed his friend wanted to run and hide in a corner of the room.

But he could find no humor within him, even as Charles began to slowly back up, one tiny step at a time.

Everett turned slowly toward the door, not wanting to give his father the satisfaction of knowing how much his presence had thrown him off-balance.

“Father,” he said with as much nonchalance as he could muster. “You’re looking as... robust as always.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” his father said, advancing a step into the room, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “I asked you what you are doing here.”

“I was invited,” Everett said, raising his chin in answer to his father’s challenge. He refused to be cowed by this man, as much as he had been in the past.

“Certainly not by me, and this is my home.”

“But it is also mine,” came a strong, clear voice from the doorway. “And he is my son.”

“Catherine,” his father said through tight teeth as he turned his head, but not his body, toward his wife. Theirs had surprisingly been a love match, which was why Everett supposed his father allowed his mother to have her way more often than not. “What is the meaning of this?”

“I wanted to see Everett,” his mother said calmly, placing a hand on her husband’s arm, as though hoping she could ease some of the tension within it. “It has been so long since he has been home — especially for Christmas.”

“And for good reason,” his father growled. “He was told when he left here that he was never to return. I thought that, perhaps, it was one promise he would honor. It seems I was mistaken.”

“I did as you asked, Father,” he said with a nod of his head, “but Mother left me no choice.”

“Didn’t she?”

“Mother,” Everett said in a softer tone as she reached him and placed her arms lightly around him in an embrace that spoke to exactly who she was — as affectionate as her station allowed her to be. “It is good to see you again.”

She had aged as well — they all had — but she had done so quite gracefully. Everett could admit that even his father’s grey beard and silvery mane looked as though they belonged on him, adding to the air of authority that had always followed him around.

When his mother leaned back and placed a hand on his cheek before scrutinizing his features, he nearly laughed at the concern in her eyes.

“Do I look that bad?”

“Not at all,” she said, shaking her head, her lips turning up slightly at the corners. “Just... different. Older.”

“Of course,” he said, before stopping to regard her as well. Her hair was a bit greyer, there were more wrinkles around her eyes — but she looked as healthy as she always had.

“Mother,” he said slowly, suspiciously. “Are you... well?”

“I am,” she said, her gaze dropping for a moment as she realized he had already guessed at her duplicity.

“No ill health?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

“And everyone else is fine?”

“Yes, of course,” she said, waving a hand in the air as she now looked everywhere but at him.

“I see,” he said, clearing his throat, not wanting to expose her in front of his father but also not altogether pleased that she had tricked him into coming here. “Was there a... reason, then, why you needed me home?”

“Can a mother not want to see her child?” she asked with a raised brow, and he nodded.

“Of course,” he said, understanding that she didn’t want to speak any more of this here and now, with his father and his friend — a man they likely did not remember — looking on. Charles himself looked equally ill at ease at his presence on the outskirts of this family reunion, as he had backed up until the wall had stopped him and he was now practically hiding behind the heavy crimson curtain as he stared out the window with bag in hand, likely wishing he could transport himself back into the cold rather than remain another minute within the iciness that had entered the parlor.

“You remember Charles Morris, do you not?” he asked both his parents, sweeping his arm out toward his friend, who looked back and lifted a hand with an uneasy, “Good to see you,” remark before he let it fall to the side after not receiving any response back.

“We shall find both of you rooms,” his mother said, patting his shoulder somewhat anxiously, as though she could put all of this together and everything would be as it once was, even though the sentiment was so far from the truth. “Ah, I can hear Barton coming now.”

They all waited another awkward moment before the butler finally did come through the door, his eyes widening in terror when he saw the earl present.

“Everything is ready,” Barton said to Everett and Charles, although he couldn’t quite meet the earl’s gaze. “Follow me, please.”

“We have much to discuss,” Everett’s father said before he left, and Everett nodded quickly before trying to catch up to Barton.

“Everett!” his mother called, and he paused and looked back at her.

“Yes?”

“Thank you for coming home,” she said softly. “It will be worth it, I promise.”

And from the smile she gave him — her true smile, one she rarely ever shared — he could only hope that she was right.

“*D*id you see?”

Ivy’s mother had barely let herself into Ivy’s room when she was already excitedly clapping her hands together, nearly unable to keep her glee within.

“See what?” Ivy asked as she continued to place her dresses in the wardrobe. She imagined that this must be one of the smaller bedrooms at Cedarwood, but it was quite pretty, with pink damask wallpaper and bedding, accented by gold bedcurtains and chairs near the fireplace.

“What are you doing?” her mother asked as she approached. “Let the maid do that!”

“Annie doesn’t sort my clothes for me at home, and she has no reason to do so here,” Ivy said with a roll of her eyes. “Annie hardly even knows how to be a lady’s maid. She does everything else but that.”

While neither Ivy nor her mother had a specified lady’s maid, they could hardly ask the housekeeper to attend with them, so Annie had seemed the best choice, as new as she had been to the household.

“Not true,” her mother huffed. “While we are here, she can do a perfectly good job in her role as our maid.”

Her mother would probably keep Annie completely occupied in her attempts to prove herself to the other women in attendance, but Ivy wasn’t about to point that out.

“What has you in such a distemper?” Ivy asked as she selected the sky-blue gown and placed it on the bed before beginning to step out of her travel attire.

“I am *not* in a distemper!”

“Very well. What has you so excited?”

“Why, Mr. Everett Pine is here!”

“Yes,” Ivy said with a strained laugh. “I noticed.”

“Oh, yes, when you fell at his feet,” her mother said with a sigh. “That was quite romantic.”

“Romantic!” Ivy exclaimed, her jaw dropping open at her mother. “That was downright embarrassing.”

“Well, he noticed you, anyway.”

“Which doesn’t matter in the least. And since when did you begin imagining that Mr. Pine might be interested in *me*?”

Her mother ignored her question as she determinately lifted her chin and turned away from Ivy. “I wonder what his father shall think of his return.”

“I suppose he will be happy to see him again. Did he not invite him back?”

“I doubt it,” her mother said, shaking her head as she stood beside Ivy in the mirror, leaning in for a better look at her face — an older, slightly more wrinkled version of Ivy’s. “He’s a prideful man. However, I know that Lady Walsingham will be ever so pleased to have Mr. Pine home. She has so missed him. She didn’t think he would actually come, but was holding out hope.”

“What about his father?”

“That is likely another story,” her mother said, raising a finger in the air dramatically. “But they do say miracles happen at Christmas, do they not?”

“They do,” Ivy said, with a grin at her mother’s flair for the dramatic. “One can hope.”

“Of course,” her mother said with a nod. “That dress is a wonderful selection. Come, dinner will be starting soon. I’m sure it will prove to be very entertaining.”

“I can only imagine,” Ivy murmured, shaking her head as she watched her mother depart, wondering once more if there was more to this party than she had initially considered.

* * *

EVERETT WASN’T sure what to expect as he stepped through the doors of the drawing room. He had known, however, that his story, or at least his reputation, would have preceded him, and he wasn’t surprised when all conversation came to a halt as he walked through the doors.

Fortunately, the entire house party had not yet arrived, and most in the room were family — which didn’t necessarily make it any better.

The room boasted not one but three chandeliers, dripping with glass, diamonds, and candles above the green and gold carpet that stretched the length of the room. In addition to the guests who stared at him, so too did the family portraits that lined the room from the gilt-edged frames which matched the adornments around them.

Charles followed in behind him, his grin of anticipation one that Everett envied. Charles hung back, allowing Everett to reacquaint

himself with the people he had left behind on his own.

His sister was the first to greet him, which made sense. They had been rather close as children, and she had been one of the few who had continued to correspond with him now and again over the years.

“Everett, it’s good to see you,” she said, walking over to him, and at her approach some of the other conversations in the room began to resume. “I am surprised you are here — but in a good way.”

“I am happy to see you as well, Phyllis,” he said, reaching out and squeezing her shoulder, a flood of familiarity rushing through him.

One by one, his siblings made their way to him — they were loyal to their father, yes, but only one had ever completely disowned him as their father had. His eldest brother, Jeffrey, kept himself as aloof as his father had been, giving Everett only a terse nod before moving on.

Soon he and Charles found themselves alone once more, until the door opened and a trio of people walked in — one being the very woman who had fallen at his feet earlier that day.

As her parents greeted an acquaintance, Everett began walking over to her as though she had entranced him and was pulling him toward her without him being able to thwart her spell — nor did she want to.

“Miss Northrup,” he said, dipping his head toward her. “You look stunning tonight.”

And she absolutely did. Her hair, which he remembered her brothers teasing her about as children, used to be a brilliant shade of red. Now it was more of a burnished brown, although he could imagine the hues that would emerge when the sun hit it in just the right way.

Her curves had grown in all the right places, and her green eyes watched him with vibrant curiosity, as though she could hardly wait to hear what he might say next.

He could remember her dimples, although while they had once been referred to as adorable, now they evoked other altogether unexpected feelings within him.

“You clean up well yourself, Mr. Pine,” she said with a smile. “Have you been enjoying your reunion?”

“With some more than others,” he said, not wanting to say any more, but she seemed to understand.

“I’m sure it will take some time,” she murmured, and while she was correct, it still made him question whether coming here had been the right decision. He looked across the room and caught sight of his mother, reminding him of just why he was here — manipulation aside — making it seem somewhat more bearable.

As did his present company.

“So tell me,” she said, “what have you been doing for the past...

oh, what has it been now, ten years?"

He let out a breath as he shook his head, hardly able to believe it had been that long. How did it feel like just yesterday yet also a lifetime ago that he had left home?

Usually, Everett hated the question when he ran into an acquaintance he hadn't seen in years — as he found the question was typically laced with a great deal of judgement.

But somehow, with Ivy, he could sense that she was truly interested to know just where he had been and what he had been doing.

They naturally fell into step with one another, moving to the side of the room until they were within the natural alcove of a sash window and away from more inquisitive ears.

"Well," he began, clearing his throat, "as you may know, I began school with the intention of becoming a barrister."

He felt somewhat awkward as she watched him with rapt attention, but he forged on anyway. It wasn't a glamorous story, but it was his, and he no longer felt like being ashamed of it.

"I finished my three years, doing as I was supposed to, keeping terms and learning from the barrister as my father arranged."

He saw her somewhat confused expression and explained, "keeping terms is required, and involves taking meals in the hall of the inn one attends. It allows for meetings with current barristers in order to learn from them."

"I see," she murmured, and he continued.

"After I finished, my apprenticeship began. There was a... situation that did not show me in a favorable light. I returned home, which is where my father and I parted ways, one could say. But that story can be saved for another day."

If ever. He might not be ashamed of some of his past, but he had no wish to have to prove himself to a woman like Ivy, who would likely judge him as had nearly everyone else in his life.

"I returned to London, but without a barrister to apprentice under. I finished school but couldn't become a barrister without one who would take me on, and it seemed I was finished in that field. Luckily, the solicitors were not so prejudiced against me and a few went against the barrister's wishes."

"So, you are a solicitor, then?" she asked, her eyes widening somewhat, although whether in surprise or interest, he couldn't rightly say.

"Yes," he said, although he hesitated somewhat. "I fairly recently struck out on my own. My mother knows I am working but isn't aware of just exactly what I do."

"You think she wouldn't approve?" Ivy asked, tilting her head to

the side in a way that caused a tendril of hair to whisk against her temple.

"I doubt it," he said with a shrug. "I'm the son of an earl. It isn't done to sully one's hands with actual *work*. Can you imagine what she would say if she knew I actually filled out paperwork myself?"

"As opposed to..."

"As a barrister I would speak to higher courts and present cases to judges. But I wouldn't be actually working with the clients — getting my hands dirty, so to speak. That is also the job of a solicitor."

"Interesting," she said, and the gleam in her eyes told him that she wasn't just saying that to appease him. "I wasn't fully aware of the difference."

"I'm happy to be of service," he said, grinning at her, enjoying the slight blush that filled her cheeks when he did. "And you?" he asked, "what has kept you occupied besides turning into a beautiful woman?"

The blush now became a much darker shade of pink, and he couldn't help but add a wink to deepen it.

"I have done nothing interesting at all," she said, with an obvious note of forlornness in her voice. "I have become an aunt, many times over."

"I know that happy occurrence well myself."

"I finished my own education, although I'm sure it was significantly different from yours."

"Perhaps more interesting?"

"Most certainly not."

"Have you left Peterborough?"

"Not a great deal," she said, shaking her head. "Although I long to. Do you remember Mr. McMillan, the grocer? He has brought in a great number of books for me, about adventures around the world. Have you heard of James Cook? Oh, but of course you have. Can you imagine the things he has seen, what he has learned? Only so much can be discovered through the eyes of one's tutor and the pages of books, I have found. I— Oh goodness, I am so sorry. I'm rambling."

"I'm intrigued," he said. "You have a great deal of interest in seeing the world, then."

"I do," she said, before tilting her eyes down so that he could no longer see what was within them, "but none of it will likely ever come to be."

"And why would you say that?"

"A woman cannot go travelling the world on her own. She cannot even travel from one town to the next. And my father has no desire to even leave Peterborough, let alone England."

"Perhaps one day you could become a companion to a wealthy

woman who wishes to travel the Continent.”

She lifted her gaze back up to his, a smirk on her lips. “If you happen to hear of one, please do inform me.”

“It would be my pleasure,” he said, before studying her much more intently. “Now, I find I must ask — why is a woman such as yourself not yet married?”

Her eyebrows rose as she nearly grimaced in pain. “I have not found a man who meets with my requirements, I suppose one could say.”

“Is that what your mother tells you?”

“She tells me that my requirements are far too high.”

“I see,” was all he could manage as he tried to envision a woman as vibrant and as lively as she tied to a man such as one of his brothers or their acquaintances.

“And yourself?”

Before Everett could respond, someone else did for him.

“Perhaps he has found *too many* women to his liking.”

A chill ran up Everett’s spine at the voice — it took him back to another time, to a woman that had nearly ruined him as much as she had herself.

“Judith,” he and Ivy both said at the same time, before looking at one another in surprise.

“I see you two are becoming acquainted,” she said, with what Everett could only describe as an evil smile on her red lips. “How lovely.”

“Judith and I have been good friends for some time,” Ivy explained, although Everett couldn’t miss the question in her eyes as she looked at him for some explanation. He cleared his throat to give himself more time.

“And she and I... made an acquaintance with one another when I was last home.”

Ivy looked between them, and Everett actually wished she wasn’t such an intelligent woman as she seemed to quickly glean just what sort of acquaintance that likely had been. Although in this one instance, she was not altogether correct.

“I see.”

“Yes, well, I should go greet our hosts,” Judith said, running a hand over blond hair that was perfectly coiffed without a strand out of place, “once I find my darling husband.”

And with a self-congratulatory smile and a smirk for Everett, she was gone.

“Well, that was... interesting,” Ivy said, although she no longer seemed to be able to meet his eye, but was instead looking around the room, as though assessing just who else had joined them.

“So it was,” he murmured, finding the magic that had been between them dispelled after Judith’s untimely interruption.

“Tell me,” she said, her voice suddenly dripping with some suspicion as she looked past him to the rest of the room, “do my mother and yours not look rather... pleased with themselves?”

“Pleased?” he repeated, looking around the room to find them. Sure enough, their mothers were deep in conversation, repeatedly looking over at the two of them. Ivy was right. They did seem somewhat... satisfied.

He narrowed his eyes, wondering just what she could be up to. His mother was always the picture of innocence, but sometimes...

“Will you excuse me?” he said, with only a quick look at her before he set his sights on his mother. “I’ll be right back.”

As it turned out, it would be some time until Everett or Ivy were

able to speak with either of their mothers. Ivy watched Everett walk away — a rather enjoyable experience, as it were — and saw that before he could reach his mother, his father had joined her, causing Everett to hastily turn away.

Ivy knew that ambushing her own mother here in the drawing room would get her nowhere — best to wait until they were alone.

But first came dinner and the announcement of the festivities that would follow over the next two weeks.

Lady Walsingham was not an overly enthusiastic woman — except when it came to Christmas celebrations. Ivy knew from past parties just how much she enjoyed draping her house in greenery, candles, and decorations. The Yule Log was searched for by the entire party, and the Christmas dinner itself was the most extravagant Ivy had ever seen. The most reserved part of the entire celebration was the church service itself, which was held in town at St. Peter's Cathedral on Christmas Day. It was always quite a peaceful repose from the rest of the celebration.

Perhaps it was because everyone had to be silent but for the singing.

Ivy sat back from the dinner table and placed a hand on her stomach, already regretting how much she had eaten. It had been some time since a feast like this had been set before her, and she had a hard time resisting the chocolates that had been specially imported for such an occasion.

Her skin prickled with the sensation of someone watching her, and she turned to her left and caught the eye of Everett from his place down the table. He smiled at her knowingly, and she shook her head slightly, telling him just exactly what she thought of his judgement. When he lifted a chocolate to her in mock salute, however, she was aware that he was joking and rolled her eyes at him — only to notice the smile of satisfaction shared between her mother and Lady Walsingham, one that her mother tried to hide behind her glass of sherry.

Which was why, three hours later, after the ladies had retired to the drawing room and then finally went off to bed following their long day of travel and dinner, Ivy knocked on her mother's door before her father arrived.

"Ivy!" her mother exclaimed as she walked in. She was still dressed, but Annie was in the midst of removing all of the pins from her elaborately coiffed hair. "You startled me! We're almost finished."

"Annie has already been in to unbutton me," Ivy said, turning her back slightly so that her mother could see the back of her now-open dress. Her mother tsked at her, obviously for walking around the house — even though it was one bedroom away — half-undressed. "I wanted to speak with you before Father retired."

"Of course," her mother said, smiling demurely, which was not at all like her mother — her mother was as far from demure as anyone Ivy had ever met. "Is there something the matter?"

"Not the *matter*..." Ivy hedged, trying to find the right words as she looked around her mother's bedroom, which was larger than hers and had a color scheme of indigo blue with reddish-toned pink accents. This room had a sitting area near the fire, which replaced the small vanity in Ivy's room. "Rather, I have a question for you."

Her mother waited, not altogether patiently as she returned to the mirror and motioned for Annie to continue with her pins. Annie did so, but with one eye on Ivy as she seemed quite intrigued by whatever she had come to say.

Ivy walked around so that she could meet her mother's gaze directly instead of through the mirror. "Do you and Lady Walsingham have some kind of scheme to bring Everett and me together?"

"Are you calling him by his given name already?" Her mother asked, clasping her hands together in front of her as her face lit up.

Ivy snorted. "I have known him since we were children, Mother. It only seems appropriate that I think of him as such. Of course, I still *call* him Mr. Pine."

"I see," her mother said, obviously somewhat disappointed, but then brightened. "Well, there is something to be said for a man with whom you have such a history."

"I wouldn't say a *history*—" Ivy began. "I was practically still a child when he left. He was much more Thomas' friend."

"They did always get along rather well, did they not?" her mother said, and Ivy eyed her with a pointed look.

"You are avoiding my question."

"Oh, Ivy, of course we don't have any such scheme. Do two old friends enjoy seeing their children get along? Absolutely. But we could never arrange such a thing, as flattered as I am that you would think me so capable."

Ivy studied her mother, surer than ever that she was lying, but there was really nothing more she could say.

"Very well," she said, sighing. "Thank you, Mother, for respecting me to make my own choices on who I spend my time with. I do appreciate your trust in me to do what is best with my life."

She made sure to heavily emphasize each word, which her mother obviously noted, for she sniffed loudly, as she always did when she was unsure of herself.

"Of course. You know all I do for you is in love, Ivy."

"I do," Ivy said, softening, for that, at least, she knew to be true. "Good night, Mother. I love you."

"And I you as well."

Ivy walked out the door shaking her head. Finally, she had found a man who she actually enjoyed conversing with and who also stirred something deep within her soul — and in the end, he was just another man set up by her mother.

Another Christmas at the Walsinghams.

* * *

EVERETT DIDN'T HAVE the chance to speak to his mother until the next morning, after he had taken Spirit out for a walk, well beyond the bounds of view from the windows of Cedarwood.

While there was always a huge breakfast offering every day during the Walsingham Christmas party, without fail his mother took hers in her room — the one moment of calm before the storm of the day, she insisted — although it was a storm of her own making and one he knew that she thoroughly enjoyed.

Fortunately, his mother had long been a woman of habit, and as it turned out, when it came to her timing, nothing had changed.

"Everett!" she said in surprise when she found him at the bottom of the staircase waiting for her. "Whatever are you doing, lurking down here?"

"Waiting for you," he said, although not without a smile for her. "Do you have a moment?"

"Of course," she said, although Everett couldn't miss her curious stare as she led him down the hall and into the currently unoccupied parlor. Since all the rooms were in use due to the house party, the fire was lit and inviting, and she waved toward the blue sofa, inviting him to sit. "Is something the matter?"

"Perhaps — perhaps not," he said, unsure of how to best approach the subject. "I was curious about something."

"Yes?"

"Did you invite me home with any plans to try to encourage me to

become interested in a woman?"

Her eyes flickered to the side for just a moment before she laughed lightly.

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

"So, you have no intentions of seeing me begin an acquaintance with Miss Northrup?"

"Miss Northrup? A lovely young woman, but whyever would you think that?"

Everett studied his mother's blank expression, wondering if he had perhaps been overthinking the situation. "It just seemed that you and Mrs. Northrup were awfully pleased that her daughter and I were getting along last night."

"Everett," his mother said with some determination as she shifted forward in her seat, "I am well aware that you enjoy spending time with many women and have no problem in creating... relationships with them. I don't expect your interest in Miss Northrup is any different."

He opened his mouth to argue, but then realized that if he did, he would only be proving that there was something there that was different from the relationships he held with most other women. He couldn't say why — he had only just seen Ivy for the first time in years last night — but she wasn't a woman he would dally with. Certainly not without any intentions for the future — intentions he could never have with her, nor with anyone else. As for toying with women, even for a short time — he wasn't that man anymore.

"We have renewed our friendship, Mother, nothing more," he said with a small smile that would hopefully help her understand not to pursue any interest in the topic that she might still hold. "However, please trust that history is not going to repeat itself and I will do nothing to disgrace you and the family — nor a woman like Miss Northrup, especially as I know her mother is such a close friend of yours."

"I do appreciate that, Everett," she said, reaching forward and patting him on the knee. "But I already know you would never."

"How would you know that?"

"Partially because I can see that you are trying to better your life and yourself," she said, tilting her head. "And also, because I know Miss Northrup and she is not the same kind of woman as the one you were... acquainted with in the past."

"Although *that* woman is here," he couldn't help but cut in.

"She is married now."

"Do you think that has changed who she is?"

"No, but her husband is not a man who your father could prevent from attending, unfortunately," his mother said softly as she looked

toward the door, likely to ensure there were no prying ears. "Whatever happens, do not allow anyone to come between you and a wonderful Christmas, Everett. I am so happy you are home."

While he was still suspicious of her motives — especially knowing she had already manipulated him into even returning — he knew that he shouldn't allow himself to be too caught up in her words, but he couldn't help himself. She was his mother, and as much as he tried not to allow himself to become too sentimental, he appreciated her love more than he would ever admit.

"Of course, Mother," he said, looking away from her and out the window that overlooked the grounds beyond. "Now, if only Father would feel the same."

"He'll come around in time."

"Perhaps."

"He will," she urged, although even Everett could read the doubt in her eyes. "Don't you worry, Everett. All will be fine. Now, we best go see to the preparations of the house for Christmas. Would you come help?"

"You don't trust Mrs. McNally and the staff?"

"Of course I do," she said, leading him out of the room. "Mrs. McNally has been doing this for years. I simply cannot help myself from becoming involved — you know that."

"I do," he said, admiring her spirit for the season, one that had never wavered, even as his own had become somewhat suspect in the years since he had been home. He thought of the last few Christmases, spent either carousing or out at a club, his only company an acquaintance and a bottle of brandy. How different this one would be.

Ivy studied the fireplace before her. The white marble was intricately carved up each side, the pillars a beautiful design of spirals between the diamonds at the top and bottom. The mantel itself featured a vase that Ivy was sure was worth more than anything in her parents' house, and one that she was hesitant to touch.

But this was her task, and she wanted to do an exemplary job of it.

Years ago, Lady Walsingham had started the tradition of giving each guest a little piece of the house to decorate — a Christmas corner they could look upon with pride, she always said.

Most guests found it rather odd, but Ivy thought it was a lovely way to truly welcome everyone into the home and the Christmas house party.

She wondered what Everett thought of it — and then wondered where Everett's corner of the house was. Why it mattered, she had no idea. Everett was simply an old friend of her brother's who had come home for Christmas. Yes, he was unmarried. Yes, he was handsome. Yes, he was charming.

But she also knew her mother had a plan for the two of them to end up together, and Ivy most certainly didn't approve of her meddling. Besides, Everett would return to London as soon as Christmas was over, she was sure, and if he hadn't yet found a satisfactory woman in London, then Ivy knew that she, an unworldly country daughter of a squire, would not be the one he would magically decide was fit for him. And she wasn't the type to simply indulge in a Christmas affair while he was home. She might want to experience new things, but ruination was not one of them.

"There you are."

She jumped at his voice, trying to cover her surprise when she turned around, not wanting to tell him that she had just been thinking about him.

"Here I am," she said, "contemplating my fireplace."

"Ah, so this is your corner."

"It is," she said, staring at the mantel in front of her. Each side of it was lined with bookshelves, which wrapped around the room. Small

shelves jutted out into the library, creating reading nooks where chairs had been placed, most looking out through the windows beyond. "Where is yours?"

"Coincidentally," he said, a smile lighting his face and causing his blue eyes to flash with humor, "just across the room in the entrance."

"How interesting we were given the same room," she said, wanting to roll her eyes but finding herself laughing instead. Their mothers were certainly not subtle.

"Very," he said, dipping his head, causing a lock of his slightly too-long dark hair to fall across his eyes, and when he pushed it away, Ivy found herself wishing it was her fingers doing so. "Especially interesting when my mother just finished swearing to me that she had no intention when inviting me home other than to enjoy Christmas with me."

Ivy nodded slowly. "I had a similar conversation with my mother," she said, "who was quite adamant as well. However, my mother is not at all adept at telling a lie, making me more aware than ever that she is up to something — and that the two of us are in the middle of it."

"I thought as much," he said, leaning up against the fireplace as she picked up a piece of greenery and began to wind it around one of the columns that bordered it. "Do you need any help with that?"

"I should be fine," she said, but then found that she could no longer reach the end of the branch while holding the other side up. "Actually, if you don't mind—" she nudged her chin toward the end.

"Of course," he said, reaching out and taking it from her.

A shiver rippled over Ivy's skin, raising goose flesh when their fingers brushed up against each other's.

When he spoke, his voice was close, and she shut her eyes as the vibration of it ran through her. "Where would you like it?"

"Ah — at the top, if you don't mind?"

"I can do that," he said, winding one end of the branch around another piece to fasten it in place. "There we go."

"Perfect," she said, stepping back before they worked together on the other side. Finally, she finished by adding a few berries and holly to the middle.

"You're missing something," he said, stepping back and tapping a finger against his lips.

"Like what?"

"Like..." he plucked a piece of dark greenery with thick, lobbed glossy leaves with light green veins from the pile that sat on the table in the middle of the room. "Some ivy."

He smiled as he placed it in front of the décor on the mantel, then surprised her by reaching toward her and tucking a piece behind her ear. "Perfect," he said, and Ivy found that she had difficulty breathing

for a moment with his face so close in front of hers. She swallowed hard to try to calm her nerves, scolding herself for her ridiculousness.

"Thank you," she said, dipping her eyes even as she chastised herself for her cowardice. "What have you done with your corner — er, entrance?"

"Nothing at all," he said, placing his hands on his hips as he turned to stare at it as though it was insulting him. "I had no ideas so it seemed much easier to come help you with yours."

"You are waiting for my help in return, are you?"

"Perhaps." His grin enticed her to follow him over. "I do think my mother gave me a doorway for a reason."

"Which would be?"

"Why, it's the perfect place for a kissing bough," he said with a wink that warmed her right through. "And she just so happened to ensure that there was one available for me. I'm going to move a chair to hang it — will you hand me the bough?"

"Of course," she said, walking over to the table and finding it in the middle of the greenery — funny, she hadn't seen it before but now it seemed to appear right before her eyes.

She carried it over to Everett, who was waiting for it as he stood just beneath the top of the doorframe, his feet on a chair — a chair that looked like it might fall to pieces at any moment.

"Are you sure that chair can hold you?" Ivy found herself compelled to ask, studying it carefully. It was rather ornate, the light wood delicate and fragile. She thought she heard a creak as Everett shifted his weight and she bit her lip as she watched the chair wobble.

"Are you suggesting that I am too large?" he asked, his voice muffled as his arm was reaching in front of his mouth.

"Not exactly," she murmured, "just that, well, it seems like a rather expensive chair and a delicate one at that. Perhaps we should look for a ladder, which might be better—"

"There," he said, jumping down in one smooth action, causing her to catch her breath when she thought the chair was going to crack. "Done."

They gazed up together at the bough, which hung above them and effectively reduced Ivy to silence as she realized its implications. "It is rather lovely," she managed, trying to focus on the scent of the greenery, the red of the berries, the silver of the tinsel laced through it. But when she tilted her head back down, she found that her face was surprisingly close to Everett's.

"Lovely, indeed," he murmured, but he wasn't looking at the bough. Instead, he was staring at her, deep into her eyes. "You do know what it is for?"

"I do," she said, swallowing hard.

“Shall we see if it works?”

“I—” she began, but before she could form any further coherent thoughts or additional words, he leaned in and pressed his lips against hers. The pressure was light but firm, and just when Ivy finally recovered from her shock, he was gone, leaning back from her once more with a satisfied smile, although he hadn’t moved away.

“It works,” he said before turning away as though nothing had happened, and Ivy opened her mouth to say something, but found she was speechless. For a moment, anyway.

“You haven’t done anything else,” she finally managed, and he turned around to look at her.

“What do you mean?”

“You cannot put up one kissing bough and consider your work done,” she insisted, and he waved a hand in the air, dismissing her concerns.

“It is more than enough for me,” he said. “Besides, my mother and Mrs. McNally will tour the entire house when we are done and ensure that it’s all up to their standards. If it isn’t, they will continue to add to the greenery until this house looks as though it has been abandoned and nature has taken it over once more.”

“I think it’s beautiful!” Ivy protested, and he shrugged.

“I suppose in its own way.”

He looked as though he was about to leave again, but Ivy had something else to ask him — something she was reluctant to say, for she didn’t want him to think her forward or desperate. But she’d had quite enough of her mother’s interference in her life.

“I have a favor to ask you.”

“Oh?” he said, raising an eyebrow, and she saw that she had at least piqued his curiosity.

“I know my mother — and perhaps yours — are conspiring to bring us together this Christmas.”

“I would agree with you.”

“The thing is,” Ivy found herself twisting her hands together, and she forced them down at her side, “I have had quite enough of my mother’s interference in my life. Why, if I could tell you how many men have been over for a visit with their mothers in the past few months, years I suppose—” she noted his eyes widen at the sudden vehemence in her voice, and she shook her head, forcing the annoyance in her words away. “Anyway. Yes, I am far past marriageable age. But I still believe it is my choice. I have no wish to find myself tied to any of them as they are all incredibly dull — although I do ask that you don’t tell them that. I think I know a way to convince my mother that she needs to stop.”

“And just how do you propose to do that?”

“By making her think that her plan worked.”

He stared at her with concern. “I’m not sure that I follow.”

Ivy began pacing back and forth as she tried to focus her thoughts. “What if we convince our mothers that they have succeeded? If we make them believe that we have fallen madly in love with one another? They will be so pleased — until we tell them that it isn’t going to work, and that we knew all along what their scheme was and are now turning it around against them. They will realize that they should leave us to live our own lives and that meddling will get them nowhere but disappointment.”

“Interesting,” Everett said, the corner of his lips beginning to curl into a smile. “I would say that it feels too devious a trick to pull on my mother, but then she was also the one who ensnared me into coming here this Christmas.”

Ivy bit her lip, voicing her worry aloud. “You don’t think it’s... too much, do you?”

“No,” Everett said, reaching out and startling her by tapping her on the nose. He was a cheeky one, wasn’t he? “I think this is a wonderful scheme for our new partnership. How shall we seal our promise to one another?”

“Is not our spoken word enough?”

“One more kiss?” he asked, leaning in comically enough to make Ivy laugh.

“I think that is more than enough liberties for one afternoon,” she said, pushing him away — hopefully before he saw the truth in her eyes. For it was not so much that she was averse to his kiss, but in fact the opposite. She was shocked by how much she actually wanted it, and she was afraid that if she accepted one more, she would become rather too attached.

And as far as men went, this was likely the last one she should tie herself to. For she was well aware that he would, in the end, only let her go and break her heart.

Try as he might, Everett could not rid Ivy from his mind over the rest of the day.

He was being foolish, of that he was well aware. She was but a respectable woman with more intelligence than most, and one who his mother was determined to see him grow a connection with. Only, he had no wish for any attachments. For attachments led to commitments. Commitments, for him, led to broken promises. His life was not one any woman would wish for. His name was not one that brokered any respect. All he had were reasons to stay as far away from her as he could.

Until Ivy had proposed her little plan. He knew it was folly to agree to it, for by the end it was likely that someone was going to be hurt — if not their mothers, then Ivy herself. Everett wasn't exactly proud of the fact that he had broken his fair share of hearts in his day, and he didn't want to add Ivy's to the list.

But as this was her idea, he wasn't entirely sure of how to say no. If she had chosen this path, who was he to argue?

Later that afternoon, a few more guests had arrived at Cedarworth Manor, all who had been rather astonished to find Everett in attendance. He could sense a fair bit of scrutiny of himself as well as his father, but they had made a silent agreement to ignore one another for the time being — it seemed best that way for all involved.

There was another party guest who he had chosen to ignore, and could only hope that she had good enough sense to also stay away. With Christmas just two days away, all of the guests had now arrived, and many of the younger set were gathered this late afternoon in the drawing room.

"Everett!" his sister Phyllis greeted him with a kiss on his cheek, and he smiled in response as she linked her arm through his and led him underneath the archway and into the room. "We're just about to play 'Jacob, Where Are You?'"

"Ah, remind me how that one goes again?"

She rolled her eyes at him, as though his memory of the game should have lasted over the past ten years, but she humored him

anyway.

"It's like Blind Man's Bluff. After one of us is blindfolded, another takes a bell. Whoever has the bell is Jacob. When the blindfolded person asks, 'Jacob! Where are you?' then Jacob must ring the bell. This goes on until the blindfolded person catches Jacob."

"Ah, yes," he said, a rush of childhood memories suddenly returning. "I remember it well, actually."

He did remember that he rather enjoyed playing the role of Jacob and that he was nearly never caught. Although he supposed now it would all depend on just who was in the role of the blindman...

"I think we're all here!" Phyllis said, looking around the drawing room, which was now full of faces that Everett remembered from childhood, although all had aged of course. Charles seemed right at home in the middle of them, even though he had never been at such a party in his youth, for his circles were not exactly the same as these. The games they had played were usually outdoors or in Charles' own home, which had not been nearly as opulent as Everett's, but just as loving and much more comfortable.

His siblings were here, as was Ivy's brother Thomas, who Everett had spent a great deal of time with when they were children. He was happy to discover that Judith and her husband, Sir Richard, were not present at this game, a small bit of fortune.

"Any volunteers to be blindfolded first?" Phyllis asked, looking around the group.

Ivy stepped forward, never a tentative one. "I will."

"Wonderful," Phyllis beamed. "And who would like to be Jacob?"

"I would be happy to," Everett found himself saying, catching Ivy's look of surprise as he did so.

Phyllis picked up the blindfold to pass to Ivy, but Everett took it from her hand, and Phyllis blinked rapidly as she couldn't seem to understand just what he was doing.

"You're Jacob, Everett, not the blindman."

"I know."

"But—"

"Allow me," he said, walking over to Ivy and lifting the red silk scarf before her eyes, catching them with his own and winking before he covered hers.

He subtly brushed his fingers over her neck before lifting his hands to tie the knot, noting her shiver when he did so.

"Can you see anything?" he asked, his lips just beside her ear, and she shook her head rather jerkily.

"Good."

He stepped back and away from her, catching Phyllis' suspicious glance as she passed him the bell. He gave it a little jingle and saw

Ivy's head swing toward him. He had a feeling she would be an excellent pursuer.

The rest of the party all began to move about the room under Phyllis' direction, and Ivy began to call out, "Jacob! Where are you?" Everett rang his bell as he darted around the room, Ivy in pursuit, her skirts rustling as she sprinted toward him. He was surprised at her speed and found that he had to move faster than he had expected.

There were enough people in the room that she was confused a couple of times, and she never quite caught him. Soon all of them were laughing and running about, taken back to their days as children when they would do the same up in the nursery. Everett was helped by the fact that he couldn't take his eyes off Ivy — especially when she was blindfolded like that. Oh, the things he could do with her in such a situation.

But he was not that man anymore — and not with a woman like her, who deserved much better than him. He had ruined enough women in the past. He was not about to add her to the list.

Still, a man could have some fun, could he not?

He rang the bell, this time darting between the wall and the bookshelf near the corner, where he was effectively hidden from the rest of the room unless one was standing right in front of him. He heard her call out and he rang the bell once more. As he heard footsteps approach, he realized that he was hardly breathing as he waited for her.

Then she was there, in front of him, and he grinned as he rang the bell again.

"I never said anything," she said, stepping closer, and he retreated even more into the shadows before ringing it a second time. Unable to see anything, she moved closer, and he said nothing but held his breath until she was standing before him, so near her warmth reached out to him — and then he leaned in and kissed her right on the nose.

She gasped and pulled off her blindfold, causing locks of hair to fall around her temples. He shook a finger at her.

"No peeking — I don't believe you actually caught me," he said, and she swatted at him with the blindfold.

"It's your own fault."

"I'm not sure I'd agree with that," he said with a tsk and she rolled her eyes. He grinned, enjoying the banter, until he noticed that a bit of an audience had gathered behind her.

"What's taking so long?" Phyllis asked.

"And just what are the two of you doing in there?" Mrs. Northrup inquired.

Their mothers had joined — well, this was actually a good thing, as the fact Ivy and Everett were in here together might just solidify

their mothers' suspicion that the two of them were enjoying one another's company more than they had initially thought.

"She caught me," Everett said, stepping out from the shadows and cupping his hand around Ivy's waist as he walked by, low on the back of her right side where no one else would see. He could sense her consternation following him out, but he simply smiled to himself before dropping his arm slowly, letting the muslin of her gown slip through his fingers. "Time to take turns."

"I'll be Jacob."

They turned to find that Judith had joined them, and Everett nearly groaned aloud.

"Why don't you be the blindman, Mr. Pine?" she asked with a saucy smile. "You were caught, after all. Now you can chase me."

All of the pleasant feelings that had filled Everett quickly evaporated at her words and he clenched his jaw, not wanting to respond but feeling all eyes of the party on him, so he forced a smile onto his face.

"Of course," he said, although he had a hard time loosening his jaw. "Let us begin."

* * *

IVY COULDN'T UNDERSTAND the sudden change that had transformed Everett. One moment, he was chasing and teasing her, the next he was sullen, as though angry, and she had no idea what had caused it.

She hadn't done anything to produce such consternation — had she?

Ivy watched him half-heartedly try to find Judith, who seemed rather pleased by the entire situation, although why, Ivy wasn't sure. She and Judith had become rather close friends a few years ago, although since Judith had married, she hadn't been around nearly as much. Ivy wasn't ignorant and knew that part of the reason Judith had frequented their home was because she had been trying to capture the attention of Ivy's brother Thomas, but in the end, he had been far too smitten with Susan, the woman who had become his wife.

Or maybe... she crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back against the wall as she surveyed the room — was *Judith* the source of Everett's consternation? Ivy had no idea why that would be. She couldn't even recall when the two of them had met before, but Ivy did notice that as soon as Judith had joined them, his entire countenance had changed.

She shook her head, putting it from her mind for the moment. There was only one thing she could do — and that was to ask Judith herself.

It took some time before they had a moment alone, but once the game was finished, Ivy asked Judith if she might like to take a walk around the room together while the rest of the party had their tea and pastries.

"Of course," Judith said, her lips curling into a smile. Judith had always been a beauty, her blond locks and blue eyes drawing the attention of most of the men of her acquaintance. All in Peterborough had been smitten with her, and as soon as those pink, pert lips of hers spoke any words that beckoned them her way, it was always assured that Ivy would be overshadowed if she was in the same company.

Not that she particularly minded, for she had no wish to marry and remain in Peterborough.

But still — it often wasn't easy to have a friend like Judith. She did know, however, how to find a bit of thrill in everything she did, a trait which Ivy had always appreciated, although she had been careful in sharing any information with her as Judith was not the most... circumspect person in the world.

"Tell me, what is on your mind?" Judith asked as they began to walk together down the length of the long drawing room.

"Primarily how lovely it is to see you again," Ivy began. "It has been far too long."

"It has, hasn't it? Richard has been ever so busy."

Sir Richard Bradley, a baronet who lived but a few miles away was, of course, close to Everett's family as they were the nearest family who were something more than villagers. Despite her father being nothing more than the physician, Judith had captured Sir Richard's eye — as a matter of fact, at one of these very Christmas parties. He was a good fifteen years older than she was, but Sir Richard had made her a lady, and that was what Judith had always wanted.

"I understand," Ivy said. "Your life has changed quite a bit since marrying."

"It has. I'm glad you appreciate that."

"The last time you were at a Christmas party here at Cedarworth was when you and Sir Richard met, was it not? When you attended with my family?"

"It was."

"Does that not seem so long ago?"

"A lifetime ago," Judith said with a dramatic sigh.

"Was there any other time that you met any of the family?"

"The Pine family?"

"Yes."

"No, just here," Judith said, before turning to her quizzically. "Why do you ask?"

"It just seems that you and Everett knew something of one another."

"Everett?"

"I'm sorry," Ivy said, feeling her cheeks warm slightly. "I should say Mr. Pine, but when one has known someone since childhood it is hard to think of him that way."

"Of course," Judith said, before turning knowing eyes on Ivy as they reached the other end of the room. Ivy did all she could to avoid Everett's stare as they passed him, where he was reclining on a settee next to Charles Morris, who Ivy hadn't seen in years but who she did remember as being a close friend of Everett's — one his father wholeheartedly did not approve of. "And then there is the fact that he is rather easy to look at, is it not?"

"Oh, I didn't mean—"

Judith cut her off with another dramatic sigh. "There is something I should tell you, Ivy, although I had promised myself I never would tell out of respect for the family."

She sounded rather serious. Ivy looked over at her with consternation, and when they reached the end of the room, Judith stopped walking and pulled her over to a pair of satinwood open armchairs near the corner of the room that were not exactly comfortable but were placed in the ideal position. They had a view of everyone in front of them and yet they were out of hearing range of the rest of the party.

"What is it?" Ivy asked, urging Judith to continue, although she knew that Judith had always enjoyed the dramatics.

"It has to do with that Christmas I was here — and with the very Everett Pine you have been watching since you got here."

"I haven't!" Ivy protested, shaking her head, not wanting to seem desperate. "It is a funny story, you see, as our mothers are trying to get us together and we thought perhaps we would play a trick on them by—"

"It doesn't matter," Judith said, waving a hand. "What matters is that you are careful."

"Why?" Ivy asked, leaning forward, nearly holding her breath as she both needed to know what Judith was going to say but at the same time wasn't sure whether she wanted to hear it.

"That Christmas party? Everett was here."

"He was not. His last had been the year prior."

"That's not true. That Christmas, he came home to see his father and the two of us accidentally found one another in a parlor. We were alone together for only a few minutes, but in that time he... acted quite inappropriately toward me."

"He what?" Ivy was still thinking about that Christmas. It had been

years ago now, and she could hardly remember a time when Judith had been alone, as she had accompanied Ivy and her family. Ivy had been seventeen, Judith but a couple of years older.

“He told me that he had come home — that he was trying to explain himself to his father, and hoped that Christmas would be the best time to do so.”

“He did?” Ivy asked, intrigued. She knew that Everett and his father had had a falling out, when he had done something to earn his father’s reproach. This must have been when he returned to try to mend the relationship and move forward.

“Apparently,” Judith said wryly. “But then...”

She looked off into the other corner of the room, and Ivy tried desperately not to ask her then what, but she couldn’t help herself. She needed to know.

“Then what?”

“Then his father walked in on us.” Judith heaved a great sigh.

“On... the two of you?”

“Yes. Everett had kissed me under the mistletoe and then he... well, he attempted to take additional liberties.”

Shocked, Ivy felt her jaw drop open, especially as she thought back to her own almost-kiss with him under the mistletoe. Judith’s story somehow made her entire exchange with Everett somewhat sullied.

“Wh-what happened then?”

Judith shrugged. “His father came in before anything much could. He called Everett a fool, for if he had been found by anyone else, he would have had to marry me, and how could an earl’s son marry a physician’s daughter?”

“How indeed,” Ivy murmured rather sarcastically, thinking of her own difference in stations from the man.

Judith pushed an invisible hair back from her forehead. “As it happened, I fortunately found Richard that Christmas and all turned out well. For me at least.” She smiled with some self-satisfaction. “I suggest you learn from my mistakes.”

With that, apparently pleased with her telling of the story and its dramatic ending, she stood and strode away from Ivy.

Ivy rubbed her temple, trying to stave off the headache that had suddenly begun to form. She had known that Everett was not a man with whom to plan anything serious. She just hadn’t realized the extent of it.

She looked across the room, meeting his gaze and he smiled at her, although a bit more tentatively than before. That vulnerability — oh, why did it make something within her want him even more?

She should be running as far from him as she could.

But for some reason, she just couldn’t seem to make herself stay

away.

“*W*hat was Judith telling you?”

Ivy started, surprised to find her brother was now occupying the chair that Judith had recently vacated. Had she really been so preoccupied that she hadn’t even noticed her leave?

“Oh... nothing particularly interesting.”

“Really?” Thomas said, raising an eyebrow as he simultaneously crossed his arms over his chest and sat back into the chair, which squeaked as he did so. “You seemed *quite* interested.”

“Perhaps I was,” she said with a sigh. “It was a tale — I’m just not entirely sure what to think of it.”

“Did it have anything to do with Everett Pine?”

“Why ever would you think that?” Ivy asked indignantly, and Thomas had the audacity to snort at her. She had always been closer to her brother than she had either of her sisters and she missed him, even though he lived but a short ride away.

“Because you haven’t stopped staring at him the entire time I’ve been sitting here.”

Ivy wrenched her gaze away from Everett where he sat conversing with Charles, and smiled prettily at Thomas, who looked more like her than her sisters did, with the same eye color and slightly hooked nose.

“Shouldn’t you be somewhere with your wife?”

“She’s with the baby.”

Ivy decided that the best thing to do was accept that if anyone could help her at the moment, it was Thomas.

“You knew Everett rather well, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Thomas said hesitantly. “But that feels like a lifetime ago.”

“Even still,” Ivy said pointedly, not letting Thomas skirt the question, “what kind of man was he?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say he was a *man* yet when I knew him well,” Thomas said, running a hand through his hair, which was the same color as Ivy’s own. “He was more a boy, but he was always the good sort. Saw the other lads for who they were, not who their parents were. He was fair, always made sure that no one was left out, that sort of thing. To this day, I’m still shocked by the falling-out he had with

his father, and at such a young age too.”

“Did you know much about it?”

“No.” He shook his head before setting his jaw grimly. “I only heard things of him afterward.”

“What sort of things?”

Thomas shook his head again, only this time much more adamantly. “Nothing that should be spoken of with a lady.”

“I am no lady!” Ivy said hotly, and her brother looked at her from beneath furrowed brows.

“You know what I mean.”

“Thomas,” she tried to reason, “you and I have always been honest with one another.”

Thomas stared at her for a moment and Ivy could practically see the war within him through the reflection of it upon his facial features.

“Very well,” he finally said. “Everett had a... reputation for his popularity with the women after he left Eton.”

“A reputation?”

Thomas colored. “I really shouldn’t be speaking of this with you.”

“Thomas.”

“Don’t make me say it, Ivy. He liked women. Many women. And they liked him. Is that enough?”

“Oh.” It was Ivy now who sat back heavily in the chair. She had been hoping that Thomas would put doubt in Judith’s story, but he was only serving to further solidify it. “Yes. I suppose it is.”

“Now, don’t go putting too much stock in that. It’s just what I’ve heard. There have also been some stories placing doubt in his trustfulness of his professionalism, though I don’t know much about that. I’ve also heard, however, that he’s turned things around. Is trying to create a better reputation for himself.”

“Is that why you think he’s here, to regain his father’s trust?”

Thomas shrugged. “Perhaps. Also, I believe his mother asked him here.”

“That is what he told me as well. In fact,” she leaned in closer to her brother, “I believe Mother and Lady Walsingham would like to see the two of us together.”

“The two of you?” The bounder had the audacity to laugh.

“What’s so humorous about that?” Ivy asked indignantly, and, finally seeing her annoyance, Thomas did his best to stifle his sniggering.

“It’s just... you and him, Ivy, you are worlds apart. He’s a... well-seasoned man who lives in London and you’re...”

“I’m what?” Ivy asked, raising her chin defiantly, daring him to say it.

“You’re... a country girl,” he said with a shrug. “Nothing wrong with that, though.”

“According to you,” Ivy said, setting her shoulders back and down as she tried to hide her annoyance. “Well, thank you, Thomas.”

“Somehow, I feel like this conversation is not what you had hoped it would be.”

“You’re somewhat right about that,” Ivy said, “but at the same time, the truth is all I asked for, and truth you gave.”

Thomas hesitated for a moment before reaching over and quickly clapping a hand on Ivy’s shoulder. “Cheer up. It’s Christmas. What can go wrong at Christmastide?”

“What indeed?” Ivy murmured.

* * *

“AH, MR. PINE?”

Everett had been watching Ivy and Judith rather closely, wondering just what they were speaking about — and whether he really wanted to know. Now she was joined by her brother, and he became even more concerned.

“Yes, Barton?”

Why did Barton seem so nervous? That wasn’t typical behaviour.

“Your father would like to see you in his study.”

Ah, that would explain it. His father likely hadn’t been in the finest of moods if he was asking to see Everett. There was only one likely explanation for his summons — he had yet another lecture waiting, to tell Everett exactly what he thought of him and demand an apology as well as a complete renouncement of his current life and a return to the path that had initially been set for him.

Everett was aware — through Phyllis — that his father was not exactly proud of his career as a solicitor, one that he felt was too far beneath their station in life. While Everett had apologized to his father — to his entire family, in fact — his father had also demanded that he apologize to the barrister he’d parted ways with years ago.

Which was something Everett would never do.

For it was that very man who was the entire cause of the break between Everett and his family. Who’d made Everett question everything he was and everything he had planned for himself. That Everett had left the barrister, Benjamin Jackson, and that life said more about him than his father would ever know — for he refused to share with him what had happened, not when his father had so readily believed the story Jackson had told.

A bit of support would have been nice, but if his father couldn’t have provided that for him without question, then he didn’t want it

anyway.

His footsteps were muted as he walked down the thickly carpeted hallway before pausing outside his father's study. He would have preferred to just continue walking by, but he was in his father's house and therefore would show him respect — respect that his father hadn't provided him.

Everett tried to ignore the pounding of his heart that matched his fist upon the door, a knock which his father answered with a grave "come in."

Everett pushed the door open, finding that his father was alone. He nodded to him but didn't move into the room until his father invited him in by waving an arm toward the chair in front of his desk.

"Sit," he said, but when Everett didn't move, he finally added, "please," although not without a huff that showed he didn't appreciate the addition.

Everett pulled out the brass near-gold chair with scroll arms, likely worth a hundred of the chairs that sat in his own office. He took a seat, crossing his arms over his chest in his own defense as he stared at his father.

"I know that this is all your mother's doing," his father said, stroking his silvery beard, and Everett noticed that his father looked somewhat weary and rather... well, old. It hurt to recognize it, a reminder of how long he had been away and how much time had passed for everyone else in his life while he had been gone.

"And I am aware that you are not particularly happy about it," Everett finally responded, the first thing he had said since walking in.

"No," his father said, tapping his knuckles against the desk. "I had hoped that you would return of your own volition."

"Did it not occur to you that perhaps I had hoped to be invited back — by you?" Everett asked, hearing the crack in his voice and immediately clearing his throat to be rid of it. One didn't show emotion — especially in front of Lord Walsingham.

"Did you apologize to Jackson?"

"No," Everett said, allowing the bitterness to flood through his words.

"Well, then," his father said, shrugging his shoulders, "the invitation was not coming."

Everett leaned forward. "I've always wanted to know — what exactly did Jackson tell you?"

"About you?"

"Yes."

"That you were lazy. That you didn't listen to a word he said. That you challenged him when you were supposed to be working for him, learning from him. That instead you went against him and you nearly

ruined him.”

“I nearly ruined him?” Everett couldn’t help the snort of derision that emerged. “He was doing that all on his own. I just tried to save those who had been on the other end of his... work.”

“His work?”

“His work, if that’s what you’d like to call it.”

“And you would know, because you are such an esteemed colleague of his now?”

“I know because I know the difference between right and wrong,” Everett said, standing now, unable to contain the ire that filled him any longer. “It doesn’t matter what happened or what he did. What matters is that you believed him over your own son.”

“You had not exactly given me great reason to believe in you.”

“So I had a few transgressions as a youth,” Everett said, raising his hands in the air before allowing them to slap back down against his thighs. “I can hardly believe that you still hold it against me fifteen years later.”

“You stole from Lord Allenby!”

“It was just a trinket, and I gave it back. It was simply a foolish prank.”

“And the things you did to the staff here.” His father shook his head, obviously still as disgusted by Everett’s actions as he had been all of those years ago. “Barton still can hardly stand to be in your presence, so convinced is he that you are going to have someone jump out from the shadows and scare him, or that you will be placing insects in his tea.”

“Barton was a man. He should have been able to handle a few childish jokes.”

“But he was a servant. Therefore, he could do nothing to prevent your antics.”

Everett walked to the window, watching the wind whipping through the trees. He was finished with this conversation, and had other things he would prefer to be doing — such as learning where Ivy currently was and what exactly Judith had said to her.

“Was there anything else you wanted from me?” he asked, not turning around when he heard the creak of his father’s chair as he rose and walked over before coming to stand behind him.

“Since you are here, in my home, I had wanted to speak to you to determine if you had returned with any regrets for your past,” his father said, the bitterness in his tone evident. “I see there is none.”

“There isn’t,” Everett said in a matching intonation. “You’ve wasted your time.”

“Apparently.”

“Is that all?” Everett asked, turning to look at his father. “Would

you like me to leave now?"

His father stared at him with eyes so like Everett's own except perhaps now the irises a bit paler, the whites a bit redder, as though he could read his thoughts to help him decide what to do.

"Stay," he said, although he obviously wished to say otherwise. "Your mother would never forgive me if I forced you to go, and life is much easier when she isn't upset with me."

"Very well — for her," Everett said, walking to the door, but stopping when he reached it, his hand on the knob. He turned around slowly to meet the waiting stare of his father.

"I'm not sorry for what happened," he said, trying to properly explain himself, "but I am sorry that it came to this. That you and I are... well, where we are."

"It was your own choice," his father said. "One that can be changed, should you so choose."

Everett had nothing else to say. For his father would never admit to any fault, to any defeat. It was the man he was. And Everett himself was too stubborn to give in when he had done nothing wrong.

So instead, he simply turned around and left.

Ivy knew that it would be in her best interest to simply forget about Everett Pine and this silly scheme she had made up — a scheme that he hadn't complained about, meaning that he at least wasn't averse to her company, something that had pleased her.

It was the reason for his easy acceptance she now was supposed to doubt. From everything first Judith and then Thomas had told her, he was not a man to be trusted. She had a feeling that Judith might have embellished her story as she had always been wont to do — but even so, Ivy couldn't completely discount everything that Judith had told her. Ivy had been aware that Everett was a flirt, but if there was more to it... well, that could spell trouble.

Although trouble actually sounded rather intriguing right about now.

What that said about her, she had no idea. That she was more bored than even she had imagined?

Regardless, she would allow Everett to speak for himself. It was not as though she had a reason to hold any high standard over his head. He had promised her nothing but that he would help in tricking their mothers — not exactly a promise of engagement or even courtship besides a fake one.

Which was why she now found herself tapping her foot impatiently as she watched the door of the drawing room. He was late, as always. She should have simply sought him out that afternoon, but she had no idea where to look, save his bedchamber, and she wasn't about to extend their fake courtship that far.

And then suddenly, as though she had conjured him up, there he was, standing in the entryway. Ivy had to consciously prevent the smile from spreading across her face. There was something about him that seemed to welcome joy — which was likely the very reason that so many women were drawn to him. Women who now included herself.

Except... tonight he wasn't wearing his typical smile, the one that greeted everyone he met. No, his expression was one that Ivy had never seen upon him before, one that spoke to emotions that were

very un-Everett-like.

Ivy stood, sensing her mother's approving nod, but she ignored her for the moment as she stepped toward Everett, needing to know what had happened — had she done something? Had he found out that she was asking questions about him?

"Good evening?" she said as she neared, hearing the question in her voice but unable to help her hesitancy.

"Ivy," he said, his voice without tone or inflection, and Ivy swallowed as she did her best to read him.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, trying to search the depths of his eyes as though they might tell her something his words would not.

"Just fine," he said, although sarcasm leaked off his words. "Why wouldn't they be?"

"You seem not quite like yourself."

"I just walked into the room," he said, looking past her as though there were people of more importance he had to speak to. "Besides, no one here, including you, really knows what I'm like, now, do you? You haven't seen me for over ten years, and it seems that no one really knew me before then either."

Ivy took a step back. She had been prepared for him to be in a mood, but she hadn't realized that his expression was not just one of disappointment but of downright melancholy.

"Perhaps you best speak to someone who does know you, then," she said, drawing up as tall as she could stand, refusing to be cowed. "Where is Charles?"

"*Mr. Morris* has likely taken himself off to a corner of the room somewhere with a woman, if I know him as well as I do."

"Not unlike something you would do yourself?" Ivy asked, winging up an eyebrow. If he wanted to speak to her in such a manner, then she would give it right back. She didn't know what had led to this attitude, but what she did know was that she certainly hadn't done anything to deserve this type of response.

He snorted. "If you're so sure about that, why are you still here talking to me?"

"A very good question," she said, setting her shoulders back straight and placing what she hoped was a pretty smile on her face. "I will bid you good evening, then, *my lord*, and should you wish to return to our conversation with less cynicism, I would be happy to take part. Until then, farewell."

She turned her back on him, hoping that she had made her point. Yet even as she walked away with a fake smile on her face but heaviness in her step, a part of her was telling her to stop, turn around, and find out what was truly bothering him.

Unfortunately, she was far too stubborn. One thing was certain,

however — this man stirred in her feelings that hadn't been present for a long time. For what felt like years now, she had been coasting from one day to the next. She had been dreading this house party, but as ornery as Everett had been, she couldn't help but look forward to what the next encounter between them would bring.

* * *

EVERETT KNEW he had been a beast to Ivy. She had walked over to him, all smiles and sunshine and satisfaction, and all he could feel was grim discontentment. He rubbed a hand over his face as he found what looked to be a new — at least from his last visit — Egyptian-themed sideboard, where he poured himself a brandy nearly up to the rim of the glass. Tonight, he had no time for the sips that the staff would bring him.

"If you're done with the Northrup girl, do you think I could see if she might be interested in an apothecary's son?"

Everett had to work to contain the growl that rose in his throat as he turned to the man who was closer to him than any of his own siblings.

He was about to open his mouth and tell Charles just exactly what he could do with that thought when he saw the twinkle in his eye and the smirk that had engrained itself in his cheek.

"You're an ass," he said instead, rolling his eyes as he knocked back enough of his drink to make himself cringe.

"Perhaps," Charles said with a shrug. "But I also know that you are likely not sore with Miss Northrup. What has stolen your joy, man?"

"My father — who else?"

"Ah," Charles said knowingly. "So I would have assumed."

They both leaned back against the sideboard, Everett resting a hip against a pharaoh-looking figure attached to the top of the sideboard's right leg, assessing the room as it began to fill. Everett recognized most of the guests, who primarily included his parents' close friends and some of their children. In addition to Ivy, the Northrup family was represented by her parents as well as her brother Thomas, a man he had known well when they were children, and his wife Susan. Her sisters must be home with their broods of children, from what Ivy had said. There was Judith and her husband, Sir Richard, as well as one of Sir Richard's sisters. All of Everett's siblings were here, including Phyllis and his brother Jeffrey, although he knew Jeffrey far preferred his title of Lord Lakeland. It might be a courtesy title, but Jeffrey never missed the opportunity to remind everyone of who he was and who he would be one day.

Jeffrey's wife, Eunice, was a small, mousy woman, one Everett had

never met and, so far, had never even heard speak.

“We’re the outcasts here, Morris,” Everett said with a sigh, stretching a hand out in front of him. “All of these people, they have lived the life expected of them, have done everything right. You’ve done well for yourself too, nothing to be ashamed of there. But as for me, well, I’m not the man I was supposed to be. Just one disappointment after another.”

Charles turned toward him, leaning back against the lion creatures behind him.

“What did your father say to you?” he asked, wrinkling his nose. “I’m not sure I’ve ever heard you quite this despondent before. You’re usually proud of the way you’ve handed it to the man, as though your alleged mistakes are a shot against him more than anything.”

“I know,” Everett said, feeling ridiculous now for the pity he was pouring upon himself and nearly begging for from his friend. “But now I’m wondering... was it all worth it? What was it for?”

“It was for being the man you wanted to be, not the man others expected you to be,” Charles said, and Everett realized that this was likely the most serious discussion the two of them had ever had. They were good friends, yes, but conversation usually included more about the good times to be had and less about where they were going in life, unless they were greeting it all with anger at the lot that had been handed to them — most especially Everett. “Do you really think you would have been happy, doing as Jackson had asked of you, being the man without morals, without scruples, because that would have been what your father had wanted? No. You would have been miserable. And you can say something that many men of your birth can’t — you have built a life for yourself instead of accepting the one that was handed to you.”

Everett nodded slowly, knowing Charles was right but unsure where he was supposed to go from here. Charles was apparently reading his mind, for he nudged his arm as he nodded across the room.

“Speaking of scruples, the first thing you should likely do is apologize to Miss Northrup.”

“Likely,” Everett said, clearing his throat instead as he studied the crystal engravings in the rummer glass in front of him, making no move to walk over to her. She had already taken a seat with a group of ladies, and seemed to be entertaining them with a tale as they all watched her with rapt attention. She had that way about her, one in which everyone was drawn to her. He understood why. He, himself, was under her spell, one that he had tried to break but only seemed to further his attachment toward her.

“Also, your mother is walking this way.”

“Lord help me,” Everett muttered with a sigh before placing the glass, now fully drained, back down on the sideboard. He contemplated the decanter, but finally decided against filling it again. If he got too far into his cups, he would only further prove his father correct.

Before he could take a step forward, however, a sharp bark sounded throughout the room, causing nearly everyone to jump and a glass to go flying from someone’s hand, although whose, Everett couldn’t have said.

“Damnit!” he cried out, earning more than one judgmental stare, but that was apparently forgotten as the ball of fur flew through the room, one target in mind — him. Everett crouched, ready to catch Spirit, but at the last moment the animal dodged his hands and went racing toward the table where the women had gathered. Everett pushed off the sideboard in a chase after him, not wanting to imagine just what the resulting chaos would be and hoping he could get to him first.

But before he could do anything, Spirit jumped up toward the women sitting on the couch — and into the arms of Ivy Northrup.

Everett came to a halt just before he landed himself in Ivy’s lap, finding his breath came heavy with the sudden amount of attention upon him from all in the drawing room.

He waited for Ivy to ask him to remove the animal immediately, but instead he watched in amazement as she lifted his ball of greyish-white fluff in between both hands and looked him right in the eyes.

“And just who do we have here?” she practically cooed. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, sir.”

As she laughed, the tension that had filled the air of the room seemed to vanish, and Everett himself let out a bit of a nervous chuckle as he began to back away.

“Everett,” Phyllis hissed as she slowly stood and began to slide toward him, “is that your dog?”

“Ah — why might you think that?”

“He was running straight toward you, and you seemed of mind to chase after him yourself. Have you been hiding him here this entire time?”

“I’ve only been here two days!” he defended himself. “I thought perhaps I best let everyone become used to my presence before introducing them to a dog.”

“That’s a woman’s dog,” she said, wrinkling her nose, and Everett rolled his eyes.

“I know. I didn’t choose him.”

“Then how—”

“Phyllis, if you can get Spirit — the dog — out of the room, I’ll get

him back into my chamber.”

She eyed him with exasperation.

“Please?”

“Oh, very well,” she huffed. “I don’t know why I cannot bring myself to say no to you.”

“Because you’re the very best sister a man could ever have.”

“On that count, you are absolutely correct.”

Phyllis walked over to Ivy, bending and saying something in her ear. Ivy looked somewhat disappointed for a moment but then nodded and swung her gaze in his direction, eyeing him with suspicion before she relinquished the dog to Phyllis. Everett finally put himself into motion, murmuring something about helping Phyllis, and they were both met with a look of exasperation from Barton as he intercepted them at the door, obviously not entirely pleased about helping them, but knowing he had no choice but to do so.

Everett ignored the rest of them — most particularly his parents. Besides, what did it matter? It was just one more disappointment to add to the list.

Ivy had spent the rest of the evening avoiding Everett, deciding that if he had matters to work through, he should come to terms with them on his own. If he asked for her help, she was more than happy to do what she could, but she would wait for him to come to her. She had pushed enough, had she not?

There was, however, one other male who was proving himself irresistible — the dog she had heard Everett call Spirit.

Phyllis had taken the small pup away, but she had whispered to Ivy just who his true owner really was — and where she might be able to find Spirit if she would like to see him again.

Ivy could hardly believe a man like Everett would own such an animal. Not that he didn't seem the affectionate type, but how could a man who had just treated her with such surliness and disdain also take care of a tiny helpless creature and not have his days full of love for all who were near him?

Spirit was not the handsomest of canines, his hair being rather coarse and sticking out in all directions, his legs a bit short for his lean body. But there was something about him that was endearing, and she could hardly wait for the opportunity to see him again.

When the next morning dawned much brighter and clearer than any of the previous days, she decided that what she needed was some time out of the house — and she knew just who she wanted to spend that time with.

Ivy tiptoed down the hall toward the room Phyllis had told her was Everett's. She paused just outside, pressing her ear against the door to listen, her eyes widening at what she heard within.

"I know, Spirit, I promise I will take you out shortly. But you've already relieved yourself, and I have to eat my breakfast. I'll bring you back some ham and sausage, all right? I won't be long, I can promise you that. That's a good boy. Yes, I know, you'd like to roam the house, but my father is not a fan of animals within, and you are not exactly fit for the stables, now, are you?"

Ivy placed a hand over her mouth as she stifled a laugh when Spirit barked back, apparently deep in conversation with his owner.

“That’s a good boy. Now you have a little snooze and I’ll return, all right? And do keep quiet. My father is only putting up with us because my mother would likely turn him out along with us if he made us leave.”

Footsteps neared the door and Ivy scurried back down the hall, hiding in the arch of the nearest doorway as Everett let himself out of his room and started down the stairs. He was in the same hall as Ivy’s room, the staircase splitting right and left before the second floor circled around for the corridors to join. The moment Everett was out of sight, Ivy opened the door to his room, finding that just a crack was enough for Spirit, who launched himself through and into her arms.

“There’s a good boy!” she said, scratching beneath his chin, which he seemed to like as he lifted his head to encourage her to continue. “How would you like it if I take you out?”

The dog bumped her arm with his cold, wet nose and she laughed. “We should be quick, though. I wouldn’t want your owner to be sore with me.”

Spirit gave a slight whine and tilted his head, and Ivy rolled her eyes at him. “I know, I should just ask him if you can come with me. But he was rather rude to me last night, and I would like him to apologize before we return to speaking terms. Is that so bad?”

Spirit placed his head on her arm as she carried him down the stairs, looking from one side of the corridor to the other to make sure no one saw her, before she scurried out of the foyer, away from the chatter of the breakfast room and toward the library. She knew there were French doors that led to the balcony and out to the gardens beyond.

The moment they stepped outside, Spirit jumped from her arms with an excited bark and Ivy drew her cloak tighter around her. The sun might be out, but there was still a wicked chill to the air that she hadn’t anticipated. Still, she lifted her face up, welcoming the freshness of the Christmas Eve morning.

A pair of paws pushing against her lower legs nearly had her stumbling backward, and she laughed at the excited dog jumping around her feet.

“You’re awfully strong for one so little,” she said, seeing that he had already found a stick. “Oh, I see. Very well, here we go.”

She threw the stick as far as she could, biting her lip at what she knew was a pitiful attempt. Spirit was relentless, however, and a few throws later Ivy was already improving, the stick landing a bit farther each time, and she nodded in satisfaction at herself.

“Yes, I know, Spirit. It’s better, isn’t it?”

“Perhaps, but your technique could use some improvement.”

Ivy whirled around at his voice. Everett was standing against the

stone wall of the terrace, arms crossed over his chest and a lazy smile on his face. Apparently, he was back in good humor this morning.

"How much technique is required for throwing a stick?" she asked, her nose in the air, still not ready to forgive him until she received her apology. "I believe it's fairly simple."

"Is it, though?" he asked, before crouching and clapping his hands. "Here, Spirit," he said, and the dog dutifully dropped the stick in front of him. Everett stood and threw the stick, which went whipping through the air nearly twice as far as Ivy's throw.

She frowned at him. "Braggart."

He laughed. "I've a bit more practice."

Spirit, however, was apparently torn between where his loyalty should lie, which Ivy appreciated. He stood between them, his tail whipping back and forth as his entire body shook in excitement. Everett took pity on him and walked over, taking the stick from his mouth before returning to Ivy and placing it in her hand.

"Here," he said, his hands coming to her arm as he stood behind her. Tingles coursed up and down Ivy's body at his nearness, although she kept her gaze forward, not wanting to provide him with any idea of just how much he affected her.

His fingers slid down her arm, until he was cupping her elbow, moving it back and forth in a throwing motion.

"Like this," he said. "Bring your arm back all the way for more power. You're just going from back to forward, not using your full strength."

He took her through the motions a few times, although Ivy found it hard to concentrate on what he was saying or showing her, having to close her eyes and swallow at his proximity.

"Does that make sense?" he asked, and she nodded as he stepped away. He watched her, pausing, and it took Ivy a minute to realize he was waiting for her to throw the stick again.

She did so, trying to recall all he had said, and this time it went flying at least another half the distance of her original throw. She gave a little squeal of delight as Everett clapped his hands and Spirit went bounding after it.

"Very good," he said, and she turned to him with a smile, forgetting for a moment that she was still sore with him.

"Thank you," she said with a flourishing bow, and Spirit returned, jumping up between them, wanting to join in the fun.

"So," he said, leaning back against the wall once more as Ivy crouched and petted Spirit, who had rolled over in front of her, inviting her to scratch his stomach, which was now covered in brown grass that had emerged from the winter cold, "are you trying to steal my dog?"

Ivy chuckled. "I would like to, but he seems a bit too attached to you, I'm afraid," she said. "I suppose I took a bit of a shine to him last night. I know I should have asked you if I could take him out, but..."

"You were still annoyed with the way I spoke to you?" he asked somewhat sheepishly, which Ivy could admit was rather endearing on him. "I understand. And... I'm sorry."

"You are?" she asked, taken aback. She wasn't used to men who apologized so quickly — or at all — for any wrongdoings.

"I am," he said with a nod. "I had a rather difficult conversation with my father, and unfortunately I allowed my mood to get the better of me and I took it out on you."

He took a step forward before crouching down so that he was at her current eye level. "Forgive me?"

The way he looked at her, his blue eyes reminiscent of his dog's, so soulful and pleading, Ivy found that she didn't have it within her to deny him.

"Of course," she said, biting her lip. "And if you would like to tell me about the conversation, I am a good listener, despite how it might seem otherwise with my tendency to talk a bit too much."

"I like hearing you talk," he said before looking down at Spirit, reaching out a hand himself to pet him. "Suffice it to say that my father had different designs on my life than I chose for myself. That my disappointments were actually unfounded, but that he, in turn, disappointed me by choosing the word of another over mine."

Ivy nodded, desperate to ask more questions but knowing that doing so would do nothing but serve to push him further away from her.

"How did you and Spirit find one another?" she asked instead, and immediately his entire countenance changed as he seemed eager to share this story with her.

"Ah, now that is a tale," he said with a laugh. "He found me, actually. Nearly a year ago exactly."

"On Christmas Eve?"

"On Christmas Day," he said. "I was out at a club, having a drink or two, and afterward was standing on the front step, trying to decide whether to finish the night alone at home or to — well, to go out and find, ah—"

"Companionship?" Ivy supplied, wryly, not wanting to imagine just what sort of companionship that might be.

"Yes," he said, apparently relieved he didn't have to explain himself further. "Then a companion of another sort found me."

"Spirit."

He nodded. "I didn't even see him coming. I was looking out on the street, about to light a cheroot — which I do only on special

occasions — and he pounced on my legs, yapping as though he was trying to tell me something. He looked hungry, and was in sore need of a bath. I walked around for a time, trying to see if he belonged to someone, but apparently, he only belonged to the street. He didn't seem to be a dog that would survive long on his own, but I also didn't want to steal him. I put him down, told him to go home, but no matter where I went, there he was. Eventually I realized that I didn't have a choice but to take him with me."

Ivy tilted her head to the side, looking back and forth between Everett and the dog, who seemed as smitten with him as she was herself, as much as she hated to admit it.

"So he became yours."

"He did," Everett nodded. "I thought I would let him stay the night, give him some food and clean him up some. I let him out the next day, but he just went outside, did what he needed to do, and returned. Eventually he just followed me everywhere I went — well, that I was permitted to take him — and I didn't seem to have much choice in the matter any longer."

"A lovely story," Ivy said, finding that all of her chagrin toward him vanished with the story of apparent love for a stray dog. "He is irresistible."

"You would be surprised at how many people would not completely agree with you," Everett said. "Most think dogs belong outside."

"Some do," she said, "but not this dog. He's a lapdog."

"A woman's dog, my sister would say."

Ivy shrugged. "I can imagine that many a woman is drawn to you because of him."

"Sometimes," he admitted with a cheeky grin before looking up and meeting her eyes. "Are you?"

The air stalled in Ivy's lungs as she did something she hardly ever did — struggled to find the right words. She looked around at the bare trees, then the evergreens, then out toward the lake that bordered the other side of the house, hoping that something would offer the words.

"I, ah..."

He laughed. "You don't have to answer that. I'm only teasing."

She released a whoosh of breath. "Good."

"Besides," he said before she could get another word out, "I already know the answer to that."

"Do you, now?"

"I do." He winked at her again. "Because I know you would love nothing more than for me to kiss you right now."

Ivy gasped. "I—"

Before she could say anything, however, he leaned over, placed his

hands under her elbows, and came to his knees as he drew her close and placed his lips upon hers. It began as gentle as the last kiss had been, the one under the mistletoe, but this time there was an added firmness, as though he was trying to tell her something but was unsure how exactly to do so. He didn't push it much further than their previous kiss, but there was a fiery spark there that left her somewhat wobbly. When he let her go and she sat back on her heels, she was nearly breathless, unsure of just how to respond.

"That was—"

"That spoke for itself," he said smugly as Spirit sat between them, tongue out, looking back and forth as though he knew something had happened but was unsure just exactly what it was. "Best go inside now. Your cheeks are pink with freezing cold."

"I—I hadn't noticed," she stammered, and he laughed.

"It is winter — Christmas actually."

"Of course," she managed, feeling ridiculous as she struggled to grasp hold of her emotions. "Do you not wish there was snow?"

"Snow?" he seemed surprised by the thought. "I suppose, although it certainly adds to the difficulty of hosting a house party."

"Perhaps for travel," she agreed. "But to have the snow swirling through the trees, landing on your face, it just makes Christmas complete."

He smiled, nodding. "I suppose I can understand what you mean."

Ivy looked away, unsure why she had said such a thing when it sounded so childish. "I'm being foolish."

"Never," he said, before chucking her under the chin. "Now, I came outside when I saw you, so let's go and eat breakfast. Wouldn't want you wasting away."

Ivy couldn't hold back a laugh at him as he picked up Spirit and held the door open for her. He was right, she *was* rather cold, her fingers and toes nearly numb — but at the same time, warmth somehow rushed through her body and into her cheeks. Warmth at his touch, at his attention — attention that was only supposed to be for a bit of fun.

Goodness, she was a fool.

But a fool enjoying herself, that much was certain.

Everett spent the rest of the day with the gentlemen. As the day began with surprisingly fine weather, Jeffrey decided that they ought to go hunting. He couldn't seem to keep himself from joking to Everett about whether Spirit would like to join in the hunt, but Everett was still on enough of a high from his morning with Ivy that he just rolled his eyes at his brother and chuckled as he pictured Spirit running after the fox. He actually wouldn't put it past him to try, but he was too worried that the dog would be trampled by a horse's hooves to actually take him along.

Everett was rather dismayed with himself that during the outing, his mind kept wandering to Ivy — what would she be doing with the women this afternoon? Would she have preferred to be with him — or with Spirit? Everett was not above using the dog to help capture her affections. Affections that he only was pursuing during this party, he reminded himself. They might as well both have a bit of fun, and she seemed up for it. If ever it seemed to turn serious, he would then put a stop to it.

Which all led to his pleasant surprise when his mother ensured that he was seated next to Ivy at dinner — perhaps there was an upside to her meddling, after all. At least he knew he would enjoy himself.

“Be nice,” his mother whispered in his ear, to which he laughed.

“I am nothing but nice!”

“Be that as it may,” she said with a stern look, but he ignored her as he took his seat next to Ivy, his enthusiasm decreasing significantly when Judith Bradley sat down on the other side.

From the way Ivy's own smile fell as she looked from him to Judith, he had a feeling that she knew more of the story now than she had but a few days prior. Everett nodded stiffly at Judith, determined that he would forget her as he would focus his attention on the woman to his left instead.

Judith, however, made that rather difficult. Throughout the meal, she “accidentally” continued to bump her elbow into his arm, press her thigh up against his, allow her fingers to trail over his arm when

she reached across him for more food. He continued to inch away from her, until it seemed he was practically sitting on Ivy's lap instead.

He let out a long sigh of relief when the dinner was over, practically jumping from his chair to stand for the women to depart. Instead of watching the women disappear to the drawing room, however, they followed his mother's new plan.

"Since it is the night before Christmas," she began, her hands clasped together and a smile on her face that was not just the polite hostess smile but rather one of actual joy, "shall we all retire to the drawing room together? Perhaps we can all join in some Christmas celebrations?"

His father walked toward her to address the room with her, the frown on his face voicing the disapproval that he would never say aloud with so many other people watching them.

"Are you sure, dear?" he asked, placing a hand on the small of her back. "Perhaps our guests would prefer some time to share a drink or two."

"We can still do that as we sing," she said, looking up at him with a smile that asked him to halt all argument. Before he could respond, Mrs. Northrup had clapped her hands together in obvious agreement.

"Oh, I'm sure Ivy would love to play, would you not?"

Everett looked toward Ivy, whose eyes widened, but she smiled tremulously anyway.

"Of course," she said, taking a breath, and when all in the party smiled and began to follow Everett's mother, Ivy looked up at him, her lip between her teeth in that way of hers that made him want to forget everything else he was doing and take them himself instead.

"Do you play?" he murmured, and she nodded.

"I do, although it's been some time," she said, taking a breath of courage. "I'm not usually the one to play — Francine and Janice were both always much better. Susan is also more accomplished."

"But your mother apparently wants to show you off tonight."

"Apparently — to you," she said, looking up at him with a bit of a grin, a dimple appearing in her left cheek.

A soft chuckle slipped out. What their mothers didn't realize was that their help wasn't needed, for he was more than smitten already.

They assembled in the music room. Despite the fact that Everett hadn't been there in years, it looked nearly the same as he recalled, the heavy golden walls covered in mirrors and landscape paintings, with crimson curtains draping the windows that looked out onto the grounds beyond.

The long, uncomfortable bench he remembered being forced to sit on properly as a child was currently occupied by his own siblings,

while his mother perched on the end of the long daybed that was more for one person's leisure rather than for a party such as this.

Staff had, however, brought in chairs from what must be the dining room to line the walls, and as they began to fill, Everett stole a look at Ivy, who was standing just within the door, her eyes wide as she began to realize that this would be more of a concert or musicale than providing background music.

His mother patted the seat beside her, waving him over, but Everett hesitated. While he couldn't deny that he was interested in the opportunity to sit and stare at Ivy without having to worry whether his perusal was far too studied, he was also inclined to help her, if he could — although how, he had no idea as of yet. He hoped he would find himself inspired at some point.

"The pianoforte is ready for you, dear," his mother called out to Ivy with a smile, which she turned on Everett conspiratorially, as though this was what he had asked for. He simply shook his head at her in disbelief before tilting it back to gaze up at the chandelier, concerned for a moment whether the pine needles were a bit too close to the lit candles. He wondered whose "corner" had been the music room, although he guessed from the perfection of the hangings and the careful arrangements on each table that this room had been left to his mother and the housekeeper, Mrs. McNally.

While Everett knew Ivy was not exactly looking forward to playing for the party, she walked toward the piano with confidence in her step, artfully arranging the deep purple of her skirts around her on the bench.

Her head tilted down toward the keys, and Everett's eyes followed the long nape of her neck, wishing his fingers could replace the few loose hairs which were brushing the soft skin.

She lifted her hands, placed them on the keys, and slowly, carefully, began to push down the first few notes of the song. It took a few moments for Everett to realize what she was playing, but the further she progressed, the more confident she seemed to become, until she stumbled for a moment, and Everett realized she was playing the verse over again instead of moving to the chorus.

He didn't even think about what he was doing, although he heard his mother begin to murmur to him as he stood and walked over to the piano. He stepped around the back of it, his elbow coming to rest on the top of the beautiful rosewood of the instrument, one that he had played but a few times. As children, they had learned on the pianoforte in the music room, one that could withstand the pounding they gave it as they began to understand the notes. The instrument had since been replaced with a piece much finer, and Ivy was doing it justice, in his opinion.

He gazed out on everyone who was staring at him with curiosity written all over their faces, before looking down and catching Ivy's inquisitive stare. Then he grinned before opening his mouth and joining at the right moment.

*"The First Noel, the Angels did say
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep
On a cold winter's night that was so deep."*

Ivy looked up at him once more, her green eyes now shining with something he hadn't seen anyone look at him with in a very, very long time — trust. Something that meant more to him than he could ever properly explain.

Then she opened her mouth and her voice rang out, clear and confident, just as he would have expected of her. What surprised him was how they sounded together. Her voice intermingled with his as she matched him in harmony, sliding over the notes together.

*"Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!"*

And just like that, Everett forgot everyone else in the room. He only had eyes for Ivy. It seemed that giving her something — *someone* — else to focus on was what she needed to play the notes of the song, and she closed her eyes as she went somewhere within herself for a moment, the words and the music melding together with his own song until it seemed practically effortless from both of them.

When the song came to an end, there was a pause for a moment, and the entire room seemed to hold its breath. Everett had never been more drawn to a woman, and if there was no one else present, nothing could have stopped him from leaning down and showing Ivy with his kiss exactly what he thought of her, what he felt had been born between them, building from his arrival at Cedarworth until now.

But then the room broke out in applause, and both Ivy and Everett whipped their heads around toward the noise. Ivy smiled weakly as she dipped her head down in acknowledgment of the appreciation, and Everett bowed before lifting his hands toward Ivy, giving her the credit — for it had all been her doing. She had a way about her that made everything better, turning what would be an otherwise mundane evening into magic that he had a hard time explaining.

"Another!" someone called out, and when Ivy bit her lip, Everett picked up a chair and set it next to her piano stool.

"May I?" he asked, and she nodded. He leaned in, whispering to her the song he would play and the harmony she could pick out to accompany it. She was obviously a fast learner, for she nodded and they began to play.

"God rest ye merry, gentlemen, Let nothing you dismay," he began

before lifting a hand from the keys and waving to the room, “everyone now!”

The voices started slowly, hesitantly, but by the time they reached, “Oh tidings of comfort and joy,” the whole room was full of voices, some on key, some off, but it didn’t matter. It warmed something in Everett’s heart, in a place that had been lying dormant for quite some time.

He tilted his head, meeting Ivy’s eyes, seeing that they were filled with unshed tears.

And for the first time, he was truly grateful that he had come home for Christmas.

Ivy sat in her room, moving the needles of her netting as she stared out the window into the darkness of night. When it had been time to retire, she had climbed the stairs rather reluctantly. To be honest, she couldn't remember the last time she had so enjoyed herself. Here she had thought the house party would be a bore.

She shook her head with a snort. Of course, that was before she knew that Everett Pine would be present.

The words of Judith as well as Thomas still niggled in the back of her mind. She had meant to ask Everett about what they had said, but she hadn't been sure how to raise such topics. Besides, Everett didn't owe her any type of explanation. They were not actually courting, had made no promises to one another besides the promise to try to trick their mothers into believing in their interest in one another. Even that idea seemed rather ridiculous now.

What was bothering Ivy more than anything was the pull she felt toward Everett. She had planned to have some amusement with him over Christmas, to shake up her dull existence. But now she was beginning to picture more than just a week of fun. Could he — *would* he — ever be interested in her? Sure, he had passed over thousands of women in London. But was there ever a chance he might take her with him?

They were the thoughts she knew had no place in her mind, and yet she couldn't be rid of them — for they were not originating from her mind, but from her heart.

A ridiculous place, one that she preferred to ignore. Ivy lived for fun, for gaiety, and not for what made sense or seemed right. It was a trait about her that her parents found particularly vexing.

This was all meant to be a bit of entertainment, and now here she was, unable to sleep for thoughts of him.

She had finished the gifts for her own family, and as she looked at the collection of reticules and coin purses, she wondered who else she could create something for. Everett? But that might be odd, mightn't it? Especially if she didn't do anything for the rest of his family or the other guests?

She was overthinking everything, being a ridiculous woman who couldn't consider anything or anyone but the man she was chasing — the exact woman she had always refused to be, no matter what her mother would like from her.

Ivy was startled suddenly where there was a knock on the door, followed by a strange scratch that seemed to come from the bottom. She drew her wrapper tightly around herself as she walked toward it, wondering if it was Spirit — and how he had learned to knock.

She gathered her unbound hair in one hand, pulling it over her shoulder before she slowly opened the door — and found herself face to face with Everett, as though she had conjured him up.

“Everett!” she exclaimed, looking behind him and from one side of the corridor to the other as she worried about whether anyone might see him. Judith's story played out in her mind, but instead of being concerned, Ivy found herself rather excited by the thought of him visiting her at this hour of the night. “What are you doing here?”

“I couldn't sleep,” he said. When she looked down, Ivy found that he was still wearing his pants and shirt, although he seemed to have dispensed with his cravat and waistcoat. He lifted his arm and she saw that his cloak was folded overtop of it. “I took Spirit outside and realized you needed to join me. You weren't sleeping, were you?”

“No,” she shook her head, pulling the door open a bit farther. “But I'm not sure I understand what you need from me outside.”

“Come,” he said, not answering her question. “I brought an extra cloak.”

“I am wearing my nightclothes!” she exclaimed, but to that he only smiled wickedly.

“I didn't realize you were a woman who adhered so closely to propriety.”

“Not at all. I— Oh, very well,” she finally said with a sigh, stepping into her room for a moment to find a hat and gloves. “Lead the way.”

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Everett held out one cloak and Ivy stepped in front of him, allowing him to wrap it around her shoulders. It was almost as though he was embracing her himself as his earthy, smoky scent, like uncut grass on a warm dry day, encompassed her, although the heaviness of the cloak was a poor substitute for his arms. But Ivy smiled gratefully as Spirit glanced up at her quizzically before Ivy followed dog and owner out the door.

And came to a sudden stop as the wind slapped her in the face.

As though knowing how she was going to react, Everett looked back with a smile before holding out a hand to her. “It's nicer over here, overlooking the lake,” he said, and she nodded slowly before following him to the water which had been added to the property, trying to ignore the wind that was whipping her hair around her.

But then they reached the clearing in front of the lake. With the majesty of it stretched before her, she realized just how right this moment was.

“Breathe,” he murmured, and she closed her eyes for just a few seconds and did just that, immediately glad that she had taken his advice.

The air filled her nostrils, crisp and clear and just a bit frosty. She opened her eyes to the beauty of the water, which was backed by evergreens, through which the light of the full moon shone as though it had been placed there for this moment alone in order to light their path and show her the splendour of the night.

Ivy had been staring out her window since she went to bed, but she hadn't truly been seeing — for she had missed the snowflakes that had begun to drift downward through the night sky. But out here, they were impossible to ignore. What had begun as a few lonely flakes falling through the cold was now growing, blossoming, as it seemed suddenly the clouds opened up and released thousands of snowflakes, falling all around her in a symphony of blooms.

Everett chuckled, and Ivy looked beside her, curious as to what could possibly have caught his humour. His head was tilted back, and he stuck out his tongue, catching a flake right in the middle of it. He must have felt her stare upon him for he looked at her and winked, and then encouraged her to do as he did.

Ivy felt somewhat foolish, but she couldn't resist. She tipped her head backward, closed her eyes... and caught a snowflake.

“You see?” Everett said, and she nodded as Spirit began to dance around their feet, pawing at them, quite obviously pleased that they had ventured out together with him.

Ivy forgot the chill in the air, the house party behind her, and sighed as, for the first time in a long time, she allowed herself to simply be in the moment.

Everett reached out a hand, twining her fingers in between his, and it felt so right that nothing else seemed to matter.

“It's so beautiful,” Ivy murmured, looking over at him and catching his eye. He nodded, his eyes flashing with what Ivy would have said was desire if she completely believed it herself.

“Beautiful,” he said. However, he didn't look out at the lake beyond, but instead was staring at her, and her entire body warmed through at even the possibility that he could be speaking about her.

What was it about this man that made her lose all sense and reason? He simply walked into a room — or stood in her presence — and she could think of nothing else but him, if she could even think at all. That was the difference. He made her *feel*, instead of simply exist.

Spirit gave a short bark and then began to pounce away from

them, toward the trees, and Everett briefly tugged on her hand. "Shall we walk?" he asked, and she nodded, not wanting to tell him that he could ask her to go anywhere at the moment and she would have agreed.

"Tell me about your life in London," she urged, and he nodded somewhat curtly before continuing on.

"I would like to tell you that I live the life I had always dreamed of. That I am well-respected, that I make a difference in people's lives, that I have a beautiful townhouse I have earned for myself and that my evenings are filled with events of enjoyment."

Ivy waited, knowing there was a 'but' coming. He never said it, but instead spoke the truth.

"I have finally become a solicitor, yes, but I have no one who will put any faith in me for I have no one to recommend me. The barrister I had been working for — the one recommended by my father — has instead done all in his power, of which he has a considerable amount, to ruin me. I have not broken yet, but I am getting there. I live in a rather run-down boarding house where I struggle to swallow the food that is set in front of me every day. My evenings are usually spent at a tavern or some sort of establishment trying to find a decent meal to eat for a price I can afford. I am lucky to have Morris as the best of friends who has stuck by me through it all but I feel a great sense of guilt, for I promised him to work with me, but as I can hardly afford to pay myself, let alone him, he has had to work a second job as an assistant to none other than an apothecary, the very profession he could have grown into here in Peterborough, one that he was trying to avoid."

When he finally finished, he let out a deep breath and Ivy paused, allowing him the space to take in what she guessed might be the first time he had actually admitted it all to himself, let alone said it aloud to her.

She wanted to stop, to look him in the eye and tell him what her opinion was on it all, but she sensed that it might be better to continue walking. They had entered the shelter of the trees, their feet crunching on the gravel below them, and Ivy found herself instinctively moving closer toward him as though he could ward off the chill in the air and her presence would provide him some comfort.

"Would you like to know what I think?" she asked tentatively, and he gave a nearly imperceptible nod in response.

"I admire you. You are the son of an earl, and you could have chosen the easy road. You could have done all that your family expected of you. I don't know what happened to cause a rift between you and your father, but I imagine it has something to do with the barrister you have distanced yourself from. You could have done as he

asked and followed the path that felt wrong but made life easy. But you didn't. You did what you felt was right, even if it meant that the journey was much harder."

"Was this distance with my family the right answer, though?" he asked, and she could hear the pain in his voice. "I have barely seen them in ten years."

"Would it have felt right to have made the other choice?"

"No." The answer was swift and vehement.

"Then, there you have it," she said matter-of-factly. He looked over at her with a smile, one that didn't seem as ready or as easy as his usual charming grin, but it was real, and that was what mattered.

"You're a smart woman, Ivy Northrup."

She smiled, glad that the pink such a compliment would turn her cheeks would be disguised by the effects of the cold.

"I have a lot of time to observe. And to think. More than I'd like to."

"Why haven't you married?" he asked abruptly.

Ivy nearly stopped walking. She knew she had been prying into his life, but his question still took her aback.

"I suppose I haven't found the right person," she said, choosing the answer that seemed easy, the one she always gave her parents.

"You said that you have had your fair share of suitors, as I would have imagined," he said, and while it was a compliment, it was one that Ivy was rather uneasy with.

"I've had a few," she said carefully. "And some of them are fine gentlemen who I know I should have accepted. It's just... the life they had to offer was not one that I cared to share. And I didn't feel enough for them to make it worthwhile. Except now... well, now, it's likely going to be too late and I will end up in a life far worse. One in which I will constantly be relying on others, unless I find some path of making my own way in the world."

She sighed, closing her eyes at the unfairness of it, even if it was all of her own doing. Everett had obviously struggled, and she felt for him. But at least he had the opportunity to make the *choice* to struggle. She had no particular option at all besides marriage.

"So, what do you want?" he asked, his voice soft, curious, and Ivy realized it was the first time someone had asked her that and truly cared about what her response would be.

"I want..." she began, but then paused, not knowing how to truly answer the question. "I want a life of adventure. Maybe that doesn't mean travelling all over the world or even the Continent, but to be able to take risks, to meet new people, to try things that aren't familiar."

"Then find a way to take that risk," he said, squeezing her hand.

“If there is any woman who could do such a thing, I know it would be you.”

His steps slowed now, and Ivy realized that they had nearly rounded the entire lake. Spirit was still running ahead of them but continued to return to make sure that they were following.

Everett stopped, pulling her into a small enclosed area in the trees, his hands coming under her elbows. His figure was framed by the light of the moon, and Ivy was close enough to see the blue of his eyes, which she knew in the light were the color of the lake in the summer on a clear day.

He lifted a gloved hand, sliding one finger down her cheek, and Ivy closed her eyes and leaned into his caress. How good it felt to be with someone who believed in her, who didn't call her ideas ridiculous or tell her that she would have to find another way, one that involved a man who would take care of her and see to her needs.

As Everett stared at her with some indecision, Ivy couldn't help but question Judith's words and story. Would a man who took such apparent advantage stare at her like this, in a moment alone, waiting for her acceptance — her permission, perhaps — to kiss her?

She couldn't imagine that to be true.

And she knew, deep within, that she wanted nothing more than to feel his lips on hers again. So, she made the decision for him.

She stood on her toes, and touched her lips to his — then waited for his response.

Everett had known he was taking a risk going to Ivy in the middle of the night. He had worried about what she would think of wandering through the dark with him wearing nothing more than her nightgown and wrapper.

Of course, he'd had to rein in his own desires, and so far, he had been rather proud of himself for doing so. He had wanted so badly to kiss her, had known she felt it too, but he had been stalled by his own fear that once he started, he wouldn't be able to stop. That was why his previous kisses had been nothing more than soft, perfunctory, explorative kisses, which spoke more to the fun of their relationship than to anything serious.

But when she placed her lips on his, everything changed.

She had not only granted him permission, she had invited his embrace. And after sharing more with her than he had any other person, it seemed more right than he could have ever properly explained to another.

This time, Everett didn't waste any time on softness or gentleness. His fears of scaring her faded away, until he thought of nothing but the two of them, here alone in this moment, with no one around save Spirit, who thus far had respectfully maintained his distance, although Everett knew it wouldn't be long until he made known the fact he was feeling ignored.

When Ivy's lips had touched his, they had been nearly frozen with the cold of the night air, but in short order they heated under the caress of his lips. For he let her feel all that had been building inside of him since she had landed at his feet after slipping on the carriage step. He hadn't known then who she was or what her story might be. Little did he know that she would come to mean so much to him in such a short time.

Everett slid his hands within the billows of the cloak he had wrapped around her, groaning into her mouth as the softness of her curves melted into him without the confines of any stays or layers of fabric. The wind whipped her hair against his face, and the scent of lemons and cranberries washed over him, seeming to take him to

another world entirely. Her hair unbound, her body pressed close against his, seemed to speak much more to Ivy's true spirit that needed to be free to do as she pleased, when she pleased.

And she seemed content for that to currently involve him — and Everett took advantage. He teased her lips with his tongue, and she opened to him, accepting him with enthusiasm that made up for any lack of practice she might have — which he was perfectly fine with, for he was glad that he just might be the one to teach her about what fun could be had between a man and woman.

She was as hungry as he, moaning at the intensity of their kiss, her hands reaching under his cloak and her fingers twining into his shirt as she clutched him as though he was the anchor she needed to hold onto or else she would float away.

Everett knew he should stop, that he should pull away and escort her back to the house. It was well past midnight, meaning it was already Christmas Day. Tomorrow would be full of celebrations both traditional and unconventional, and she needed her sleep.

But they both seemed to need this more. As one arm held her tight against him, the other hand seemed to have a mind of its own as it rounded the front of her body and shaped one of her breasts, cupping the underside of it while his thumb grazed against the nipple that was protruding even through the fabric of her wrapper, although whether it was from cold or from desire or perhaps a little bit of both, he had no idea. But he would take it as though it was an offering toward him.

Ivy didn't seem to mind as she arched into him, releasing his lips for a moment as she panted against them.

"More," she managed before she returned to him, and would Everett really be the man he was if he didn't appease her? He slipped his hand inside her wrapper, getting as close to her as he possibly could in these conditions, paying equal attention to one breast as the other. How he longed to slip his hand lower, to show her the true taste of pleasure he could provide her, but the shelter of pine trees on a freezing winter night was hardly the place to do so.

Although neither was a house full of guests, and one that he was hardly welcome in at that.

Everett groaned in reluctance as he slowly pulled away from her, but there was no other option — not here, not now. She deserved better than this. Better than him, although even her own mother was desperate enough to try to marry her off to him. He supposed he was, after all, still the son of an earl, even if he was a rather desperate one.

"Ivy," he said, hearing his voice an octave lower than usual, but unable to help the thickness of the desire that had grown within him.

"Oh, goodness," she said, leaning back, placing a hand over her lips, her eyes glossy with her own desire, which nearly killed him to

see, knowing that she seemed to want him as much as he did her.

He tried to chuckle, although it was somewhat shaky as he was so taken aback by the intensity of what he was feeling toward her. He had been with his fair share of women — especially in the time following his separation from his family, when he had tried to fill the void of what had become a rather lonely existence — but nothing had ever compared to this. To her. Which scared him more than he could properly describe.

“Oh goodness, indeed,” he said wryly, before placing one hand on the small of her back as he began to lead her toward the house. Spirit seemed to be a fan of the idea, and it was only then that Everett realized just how much colder the night air had grown. He had been far too preoccupied to notice anything besides Ivy.

Ivy.

Just what was he going to do about her? About them?

He better figure it out — and soon. For what he had imagined would be an interminable amount of time this Christmas season was suddenly becoming far too short. Then it would be back to their own lives, away from one another and this entire plot. What had begun as a game was becoming all too real — and Everett had no idea just what he was supposed to do about it.

* * *

IVY NEARLY FORGOT the next morning was Christmas.

In fact, she likely would have forgotten altogether had her mother not awoken her. Otherwise, she probably would have slept all day.

“Ivy Ellen, my goodness, child, are you planning to sleep the day away?” her mother asked, pushing back the curtain to allow the light into the room, and Ivy groaned as she moved the pillow to cover her head and try to ignore both the brightness of the morning and her mother’s voice.

But her mother was not a woman who would allow herself to be ignored.

“Most of the house party has already had breakfast!” her mother continued chattering on, her voice too loud to be muffled by something as insignificant as a pillow. “My goodness, what will Lady Walsingham think, when you sleep away Christmas Day?”

“Perhaps she will think I was tired,” Ivy mumbled into the sheet, already wondering if Everett had attended the breakfast or if he had been equally unable to sleep. For not only had Ivy stayed awake far too late, but she had then spent a restless night in her bed as she was unable to find comfort from the desire that had overtaken her or the thoughts and questions that had circled her head after her outing with

Everett.

"Ivy," her mother scolded, "it is Christmas Day and you are a woman of six-and-twenty. Why, imagine if you had a brood of children waiting for their gifts!"

It was an imagining that her mother was more concerned about than Ivy herself, but she was aware that now was not likely the time when she should voice such an opinion.

Instead, she threw back the covers with some regret, sitting up even as she gazed longingly at the mattress before her. A couple more hours of sleep would have far better prepared her for the day, but her mother was right. It was Christmas. She was at a house party. And she had a longing to see Everett again.

Of course, it was the last bit that comprised most of her reason for forcing herself out of bed, but she wasn't about to admit that, even to herself.

"When is the church service?" Ivy asked with a yawn as her mother opened her wardrobe and began sorting through it as though Ivy was a young woman with no sense of fashion.

"Not until just before dinner," her mother said, her voice muffled by the fabric that surrounded her. "But there is much to be done beforehand. Including," she pulled back out of the wardrobe, her eyes alight with glee, "luncheon with Lady Walsingham and Mr. Pine."

"With Everett?"

Her mother's grin seemed to widen, although Ivy wouldn't have thought it possible.

"Yes, with *Everett*."

Ivy had nearly forgotten about the plan her mother and Lady Walsingham had concocted, so consumed she had become with her own relationship with Everett — one that didn't seem to simply be a game any longer.

"That will be lovely," she said noncommittedly, as her mother pulled a ruby red dress out of the wardrobe. It was actually one of Ivy's favorites, although she wasn't about to tell her mother how much she approved of her choice.

"You *must* wear this tonight," her mother said, nodding to herself in satisfaction. "No one will be able to take their eyes off you. As for today," she tapped a finger against her lips before reaching her hands back in. Ivy wondered just what was causing such a difficult decision, as she had not exactly brought an entire wardrobe of clothing, "this will do nicely."

She pulled out a cream dress with gold trimming, one that Ivy did actually approve of as well, partly because it was a touch thicker than some of her other day dresses and therefore would be much warmer.

"Now," her mother continued, "I shall have Annie come in and see

to your hair.”

“I can do it myself,” Ivy protested, but her mother was already shaking a finger at her.

“Today is Christmas. And we have a very important plan.”

“We do?”

“The luncheon!” her mother said before hurrying to the door. “Now, do not take too much time. I shall ask if your breakfast can be sent up to you so that the entire party isn’t waiting any longer than they already have.”

“I hardly think that I would be cause for anyone to delay.”

“Even so,” her mother said, pursing her lips. “I shall see you shortly.”

Ivy sighed. Luncheon with Lady Walsingham, was it? She wondered what Everett would think about it.

She didn’t have long to consider it, however, as a knock sounded on the door, and Ivy looked up, expecting Annie — and stopped halfway across the room when the door opened a crack and Everett poked his head in.

“Everett!” Ivy exclaimed. “What are you doing? My maid is to be here any moment and my mother just left. Besides, everyone—”

“Everyone is downstairs eating breakfast,” he said with that grin that always undid any protests she might have. He had far too much charm for his own good. “I just heard that we are to have luncheon with our mothers.”

“We are.”

“On Christmas Day, no less,” he said, stepping inside and shutting the door behind him. “This is perfect.”

“It is?” Ivy swallowed hard. Had Everett become more serious about her than she had realized? She couldn’t miss the hope that jumped in her breast, even as she tried to tamp it back down.

“Of course,” he said, furrowing his brow in confusion. “This is exactly what we wanted — the perfect opportunity to convince them about how well their plan is working.”

“Right,” she said, hoping her smile seemed effortless and true. “Perfect.”

“I shall be sure to sit next to you, and might even put my hand on yours,” he said, enthusiasm in his voice. “Be sure to stare at me often, with that hopefulness in your eyes — yes, just like that. And we shall make no promises, but be sure to pepper in a few comments that will keep them guessing.”

Before Ivy could respond, his hand was back on the doorknob and he was inching it open behind him.

“I best leave before anyone comes.”

He began to back out before stepping forward once more.

“Oh, and good morning,” he said with a grin. “Look out your window — it’s a Christmas gift, sent just for you. I’m a man of miracles, am I not?”

Ivy opened her mouth to ask him what type of nonsense he was spouting, but before she could do so, he was gone, and she couldn’t help herself from doing as he said and walking to the window, looking out on the grounds beyond — and realizing exactly what he had referred to. The green was covered in a layer of snow, so thin that glimpses of the grass below was still evident, but beautiful none the less. And then there was the lake. Ivy didn’t think she would ever be able to look at it again without being reminded of the magical moments they had experienced beside it the night before.

But it also raised the question in her mind — was the magic created for that one time and place, or was it still suspended with a promise of more?

There was only way to know — to take this forward, one step at a time.

Everett found that his emotions were thrumming between desire to hope for the future and realism that kept him grounded in the present.

And that present currently meant luncheon — with his mother, Mrs. Northrup, and Ivy.

This game had become all too real, and Everett knew he needed to take a step back and determine where both he and Ivy stood.

Their mothers, however, were far too obviously in favor of the match, and he couldn't miss the opportunity to have some fun.

Everett, of course, was the last one to luncheon in the parlor, which was being held rather early today due to the church service they would attend that evening. He never meant to be late — he just always tried to do too much with not enough time. Such as just now, when he had thought he had time to take Spirit for a quick outing.

"Good afternoon, ladies," he said with a deep bow to each of them, which seemed to particularly please Mrs. Northrup, although Ivy raised an eyebrow at him as though she was suspicious of his motivations for being here — a suspicion that she had every right to hold. "You are all looking particularly lovely."

"Do we not usually?" Ivy asked, sweetness dripping off her words, but she obviously wasn't fooling her mother, who eyed her with some warning.

"Of course you do," he said, striding into the room and taking a seat next to Ivy on the blue sofa, a place which had obviously been reserved for him as their mothers were sitting in matching crimson chairs across the ornate table from them. "But today, I believe there is a Christmas glow that makes beautiful women even more striking."

He flashed a grin and saw with pleasure that it had its desired effect on Mrs. Northrup, if no one else. His mother seemed to be hesitating between approval and suspicion herself, while Ivy looked amused, although of course she was the only one completely aware that he was putting on a performance.

Everett was, however, telling the truth. Their mothers had selected dresses that were obviously two of their best day dresses for the

occasion, while Ivy was draped in a velvety cream dress that showed just enough of her bosom to remain modest while tempting him to discover just what was hidden underneath the edge of the fabric.

Her hair was pulled back in the usual simple style that she seemed to prefer, with a few tempting locks draping her face.

"How was the hunting yesterday?" his mother asked, to which Everett wanted to roll his eyes. Was she really going to force them all into this dimly boring conversation?

"Fine," he said with a shrug.

"Did you take your dog?" Mrs. Northrup asked, filling the silence. "He seems quite the delightful creature."

Ivy snorted just loud enough for Everett to hear, and the corners of his own lips turned up.

"No, I'm afraid Spirit is not exactly fit for hunting," Everett said, attempting seriousness to answer the question. "He might have been mistaken for a fox."

"Oh!" Mrs. Northrup said, her cheeks turning pink. "I hadn't thought—"

"It is not your fault," Everett said, feeling chagrined that he had caused her embarrassment. "It is a valid question. Most men keep dogs for such sport. Mine, however..." he chuckled. "He is not exactly the dog you would expect for a gentleman. But then, I'm not much of a gentleman, now am I?"

"Oh, Everett, that is not true at all," his mother said, rushing to smooth over the conversation and maintain the levels of politeness she was accustomed to. "You may have taken a circuitous route to get to where you are, but you have made a wonderful life for yourself."

"A life, yes, that is for certain," he acknowledged, and, feeling Ivy's stare upon him, he finally worked up the nerve to look over at her, finding that she was studying him without the levity of before, but rather with more serious contemplation. "Now, tell me, what is to be expected for the rest of this house party?"

His mother seemed relieved at the change in conversation, as she began to explain the church service, the feast they would dine upon that night, and the many games she had planned. "If the weather holds, or if more snow falls, perhaps we could spend some time outdoors. You always did enjoy that at Christmas, dear."

"I did," he said, remembering happier Christmases, before he had to contemplate the path his life would take as the second son, away from his family and into a world where no one was truly out for anyone but themselves. "Actually, that seems to be something Miss Northrup and I have in common."

"Do you, now?" his mother said, as both older women leaned forward toward them eagerly.

“Why, yes,” he said, warming to his role now and this game that they were to be playing. He placed his hand over Ivy’s for just a moment, obviously surprising her despite their earlier conversation, and also causing glee to fill the eyes of their mothers. “We found some time to ourselves outside admiring the snow the other night. Miss Northrup was most enthused, as were Spirit and I.”

He placed a hand over his mouth for a moment, realizing that he had made a grave mistake.

“I must apologize,” he said, trying to find the right words to explain what had happened. “I know it is likely rather untoward that we were alone without a chaperone. We just happened upon one another out of doors, however, as Miss Northrup was very kindly exercising Spirit—”

“He really is a lovely dog,” Ivy cut in with an eager smile for first Everett and then their mothers.

“—and I went looking for them. We then found ourselves admiring the snow that covered the ground.”

Of course, that was not exactly what had happened, but he supposed that telling their overeager mothers that he had pulled her out of bed in her nightclothes long after midnight and then taken advantage of her and the situation as they stared at the snow was going a bit too far, even for the matchmakers.

“That sounds just absolutely lovely!” Mrs. Northrup said with a beaming smile as she was likely already picturing her daughter as part of the Pine family, even if it was upon a branch that was not exactly welcomed on the rest of the tree.

“It was, Mother,” Ivy said with a small smile, and Everett wondered if she was beginning to feel a bit of guilt at their deception — even if it wasn’t *all* a lie. They were feeling something for one another, if their time alone had been any indication. It was just that they had no intention of following it through to anything serious, as their mothers seemed to have decided would happen.

“I am glad that the two of you are enjoying one another’s company,” his mother said, as she and Mrs. Northrup exchanged a glance, and Everett’s stomach turned over for a moment as he wondered just what she was going to say, if she was going to suggest anything more than what they already were to one another. “Actually, Mrs. Northrup and I—” Here they went. “Were hoping that the two of you would become close during this Christmas season.”

“Whatever do you mean, Mother?” Everett asked, feigning surprise and hoping that he was believable.

His mother had the humility to dip her eyes, flustered.

“Oh, nothing at all. Just that you know what good friends Mrs. Northrup and I are. Of course, we would be pleased that our children

are enjoying one another's company as well."

"Thomas and I were good friends when we were children," Everett said, looking over at Ivy and winking just for her to see. "Is that the kind of relationship you mean?"

"Ah..." his mother picked up her colorful tea cup with its floral designs and took a sip, obviously trying to give herself more time to answer the question. "Something like that."

Ivy let out a strangled laugh from next to him, before covering it with a cough.

"Not to worry," she said with a coy smile. "Everett — my apologies, Mr. Pine — and I have found that we have many common interests. Being that we are two of the few unmarried guests at the party, we have also found some time to... discuss those interests together."

Their mothers nodded in unison, obviously so pleased with themselves for having planned such a successful courtship.

"Well," his mother said, "we have many games arising in which you will have the opportunity to perhaps partner or spend more time together. Oh, and tonight for the church service, Everett, you must accompany Miss Northrup to ensure that she is warm through the carriage ride and has a companion during the service."

"Of course, Mother, I would be happy to do so," he said, pleased that the luncheon was going exactly as he and Ivy had planned.

"Mr. Pine," Mrs. Northrup said, scooting so far forward on her chair that Everett wondered whether she might fall off. "Do tell me about your London lodgings. It has been so long since I have been to the city that I have nearly forgotten what it was like."

Wonderful. One subject that he would prefer not to discuss. He knew Mrs. Northrup was likely trying to assess whether he lived a life that would be fitting for her daughter, and he knew she would be sorely disappointed with the truth — as Ivy herself likely had been when he had shared his circumstances although she had kept any such thoughts to herself.

"Mr. Morris and I currently share lodgings," he said carefully. "We were fortunate enough to find rooms in a boarding house that is conducive to our needs."

"In what neighbourhood do you reside?" she asked eagerly, and Everett found that he couldn't say anything but the truth — Ivy deserved to know.

"Lambeth," he said, watching the smile fall from Mrs. Northrup's face, as his mother's icy stare remained, although she was far more well versed in maintaining her composure in any situation. "It is close to my office."

"Ah, yes," Mrs. Northrup said in relief, as though that explained

everything. "I am sure one day when you are married you will be able to find a house that will better suit the needs of you and your wife."

"If I marry, yes, I suppose I would have to do so," he said, even though he knew that at the moment it was not even close to a possibility. Suddenly, their prank seemed to have gone too far. He looked over at Ivy, but her head was down, her expression impassive, as though she was hiding what she truly felt. He was surprised to find that he truly wanted to know — although why, he had no idea. He had no wish for a wife — at least, not until he had created a life in which he could actually provide for one. And she would certainly not be a woman who knew everything about him, his family, and where he had come from, who his mother had practically selected for him.

"And where do you think you would live?" Mrs. Northrup pushed on, and Everett took a breath, disappointed with himself when he found it came out rather shakily.

"I, ah—"

"Mother, will you please leave Mr. Pine alone?" Ivy interjected, earning herself a stern look from her mother. Everett, however, had never been more grateful. "There is no reason that he has to share with us his plans for the future."

"But I thought—" Mrs. Northrup began, but Ivy was visibly shaking her head.

Lady Walsingham, obviously sensing some tension building in the room among the four of them, did what she always did, unless her husband was preventing her from doing so, and diffused it.

"Miss Northrup, do tell me, are you still netting?"

Ivy seemed equally as pleased that the strain had eased, for the moment at least.

"I am, yes," Ivy replied. "Many reticules, but there are a few other items as well."

"You must be quite proficient, then?" Everett asked, and Ivy gnawed at her lip for a second as she stared at him out of the corner of her left eye, until she met their mothers' equally inquisitive faces and sighed just a little bit before she began.

"Netting is my pastime, you could say," she began, "but I also think of it as something of an art form. I do all I can to make each reticule or coin purse unique. Framed purses are quite popular now, but I prefer the drawstrings as they fit easily wherever one needs."

"Interesting," Everett murmured, but Ivy was already shaking her head.

"Not really," she said. "It's just a silly woman's hobby."

"Ivy!" her mother exclaimed, "your netting is exquisite!"

"You're my mother," Ivy said, although her expression was rather endearing. "You have to say that."

"I have seen your work, my dear," Everett's mother added. "And your mother is correct."

"Perhaps that could be your way to see the world — or at least, more of England," Everett said, hoping he could help Ivy in some way, even if it was simply by providing some encouragement. "You could sell your wares and provide for yourself."

Ivy's head swung toward him, her green eyes wide in disbelief, and as the room went so silent that they could hear the steps of servants scurrying about in the hall, Everett realized that he had said something to offend every lady in the room, although he wasn't entirely aware just what it was.

His mother was the first to recover as she cleared her throat and smiled that smile that was apologizing for him without saying anything.

"I am sure that Miss Northrup's work is admired by all who see it," she said, icy formality in her words, "and perhaps her husband will be able to take her everywhere she wishes to experience."

When his mother spoke the words "her husband," it was clear that she had an idea of exactly who that should be.

Mrs. Northrup sat up straight, her pleasure in him having disappeared.

"I am sure that my Ivy is perfectly happy with the life she currently has," she said, the warning in her words directed at both Ivy and Everett, and Everett suddenly realized that he had been privileged to have learned of Ivy's desires for her life — a privilege that her mother had obviously not been provided. "And Lady Walsingham is correct," she continued. "Someday her husband, I'm sure, will show her all that she wishes to know."

Ivy said nothing, but her cheeks shone pink and by her rigid posture, Everett knew that she was not entirely pleased with him. His mother, ever the consummate hostess, read the room and stood, signalling the end of their time together.

"Thank you so much for joining me this afternoon," she said, her hands clasped in front of her. "It has been a delight."

They all made their pleasantries and said good afternoon. As Ivy and her mother continued down the hallway, Everett felt the coward as he hurried away before his mother could tell him how disappointed she was in him.

He sighed as he started up the staircase. It seemed no matter how hard he tried, he could never do — nor say — the right thing.

And he now remembered just exactly why he had always stayed away.

Because then he had no opportunity to ruin Christmas.

Ivy nervously stood in the drawing room, twisting her hands together, the satin fabric of her ruby red dress caught between her fingers. Why was she so worried about what Everett Pine might think about how she looked? He had made it clear over and over that he had no wish to see her again after this Christmas, let alone consider her as anything more than a passing acquaintance — a childhood friend, if you will — in the future.

And yet, when those blue eyes landed on her, she found that she forgot all rational thought and was sucked in to whatever he had to say to her instead.

It was most vexing, and she had no one to be upset with but herself.

She forced a smile on her face as Everett's sister Phyllis and her husband passed her when they entered the room. Was Phyllis' gaze rather knowing, or was Ivy just reading too much into it? Ivy heard a tread on the stair, and her heart jumped as she looked up, through the drawing room door and up the staircase, but instead of Everett descending, it was her mother. Ivy groaned within. She had managed to avoid her for most of the afternoon, her mother more concerned about her own costume for the evening, but Ivy couldn't avoid her now.

"Ivy," her mother said, immediately drawing her to the side of the room, "we never had a chance to speak after this afternoon."

Once they had begun down the corridor, they had immediately been joined by Judith's mother-in-law and there had been no time for discussion.

"It was very nice of them to invite us," Ivy said, looking around, hoping no one could hear their discussion as she was sure her mother wouldn't hold back her true thoughts.

"Yes," her mother hedged, before twisting her lips into something that could have been misconstrued for a smile but was most definitely the face her mother made when she was judging someone, "however, I was somewhat surprised by Mr. Pine."

"Oh?"

“Yes,” her mother said with a definite nod. “At first, I was convinced that he was most interested in you, and perhaps he still is. But then some of his comments...” She heaved a sigh. “Ivy, I am concerned.”

“About what?”

“Perhaps Mr. Pine does not have the most noble of intentions.”

“Mother,” Ivy said with some exasperation, “please be honest. Did you or did you not contrive for me to spend time with Mr. Pine this Christmas?”

“Ivy!” her mother said, opening her mouth wide in what Ivy assumed was supposed to be obvious shock. “I do wish you would stop assuming such a thing.”

Ivy rolled her eyes at her mother, who had apparently convinced herself that the best course was to remain true to her story. “Say what you will,” Ivy said, “but Mr. Pine has been a gentleman, I can promise you that.”

Even though a large part of Ivy wished that he hadn’t.

“I am glad to hear it,” her mother said, pursing her lips. “It is just that... I have heard some rumors.”

“Of course you have,” Ivy said, turning her gaze from her mother to the remainder of the party as they entered the drawing room, where all were awaiting to depart for the church service. The only guest absent was Everett. “It would not be a house party — particularly a party of this sort — without rumors.”

“They are not unfounded,” her mother said, her nose dipping down and her voice lowering as though she was mightily displeased — this, from the same woman who had practically been pushing Ivy into Everett’s arms just this afternoon.

“And I don’t suppose you heard such rumors after it was made known that the four of us had luncheon together?” Ivy asked, arching an eyebrow, to which her mother tutted her annoyance.

“Be careful, Ivy. That is all I am asking,” she said, moments before her face brightened considerably as another guest was obviously approaching. “Judith! Oh, my apologies, I should say Lady Bradley.”

“Yes,” Judith said, although she didn’t seem overly put out. “I can imagine it is easy to forget a woman’s title when you have known her since she was a child. Nevertheless, Happy Christmas Mrs. Northrup.”

“And to you as well.”

Ivy peered at her friend, wondering if she had expected that Ivy to also refer to her by her title instead of her given name. It had never occurred to her to do so, as they had been friends for so long, and yet if Judith was requesting her mother to refer to her as such—

“Ivy, you look absolutely stunning,” Judith said, interrupting her conundrum. “I don’t think a man in this room will be able to take his

eyes off you tonight.”

“Just what I was telling her!” Ivy’s mother practically trumpeted, and Ivy forgot her momentary concern about any potential change in preference.

“Any particular gentleman you are interested in?” Judith asked, leaning in close, the floral perfume she wore grating on Ivy’s nose. Funny, she had never noticed it before. Perhaps it was new.

Judith herself looked particularly fetching, as she always did. She’d chosen the perfect colors to complement her complexion, the pewter blue causing her eyes to shine radiantly, giving her the look of the flawless ice princess.

“Oh, none at all,” Ivy said with a laugh and a shake of her head, her mother eyeing her for a moment as though judging her before excusing herself. “You know me — always alone.”

“You really should change that.” Judith pouted. “You are a beauty, Ivy, and I know you have had proposals from many gentlemen in town.”

“I have, you are right,” Ivy said, not saying anything further as she still kept an eye on the doorway. She did notice that Lady Walsingham was looking around apprehensively, as Lord Walsingham eyed his pocket watch with a frown and a shake of his head at his wife. Ivy imagined that he was not entirely pleased about waiting for the son who he hadn’t even invited to his home in the first place.

“I heard something rather concerning,” Judith said in the volume of voice that was supposed to pass for a whisper, but that anyone passing would be able to hear. The red of her lips turned downward, and Ivy wondered just what happened that could be so displeasing.

“Oh?”

“You spent time with Everett Pine and his mother this afternoon?”

“Yes, we did,” Ivy said, already annoyed with this entire conversation. She had done absolutely nothing scandalous, but instead had only played along with what her mother wanted. Was everyone’s displeasure simply what she deserved for playing a practical joke on her own mother instead of being a dutiful daughter?

“I warned you about him, Ivy,” Judith began, and Ivy took a breath, ready to stop Judith before she could begin the lecture she was obviously preparing.

But then suddenly it was as though all of the air was sucked out of the room, and Ivy’s heart ceased to beat for a moment.

She knew before she even looked that he had entered. The first thing Ivy noticed was that Lord Walsingham’s I-told-you-so look had changed to one of displeasure while Lady Walsingham was obviously relieved. But even that hadn’t been what had alerted her to his presence.

It was the tingle on her skin, the shiver down her spine, the whisper in her ear, even though he was yards away.

When she turned toward the doorway, she found that he was not only looking at her, but staring at her, his eyes for her and her alone, and heat began to rise from the very centre of Ivy, up through her entire body until she knew her cheeks must be pink with it.

"I thought as much," Judith said with a sniff, but before she could say any more, the butler entered with the announcement that the carriages were waiting and could they all please prepare for the service.

Ivy was pulled more than walked toward Everett, and if she wasn't watching him the entire time, she would have thought there was an invisible rope that he had sliced through the air and caught her with, before tugging her toward him one inch at a time.

With each step she took toward him, his lips curled a little higher, until she was finally but a foot away and the grin had spread across his face and welcomed his dimples.

"Happy Christmas," she said, even though she had seen him earlier that day already, but she found that her tongue couldn't currently form the words she was thinking — a phenomena that had never before happened to her.

"Happy Christmas, Ivy," he said, not seeming to be aware of all that was currently swirling inside of her. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you," she said, his words warming her through, for as much as she didn't want to admit it, her preparations had all been for him. "You look rather dashing yourself."

He laughed at that, a true laugh that she hadn't heard in some time. It was long and loud, and brought back memories of their childhood, as they had run through the halls of this very house with their siblings in games of chase.

One she would very much like to engage in with him now, but with a far different ending.

"Shall we?" he asked, lifting an elbow up to her, and she slipped her arm through his with a nod.

"We shall."

Ivy had been somewhat disappointed when most of the snow had melted over the day, but it did mean that they could stay slightly warmer than if they'd had to travel to the church in sleighs instead. The frigid temperatures, however, meant that they were all covered in blankets within the carriage, and Everett made sure to slide in right next to her. When he settled his big hand over her knee, Ivy wondered how the other occupants of the carriage weren't aware of it, so obvious did it seem to her.

The other occupants being her parents, she was, of course, quite

glad they didn't seem to have any idea. Only Everett would be cheeky enough to try such a thing in such close proximity.

Her father sat in the corner, arms crossed over his stomach, eyeing them with some question in his eyes, as though he just realized that perhaps there was something going on right before him that he had not realized sooner.

Everett, however, obviously read the look correctly and with a few questions about Ivy's father's most favorite of hobbies — his horses — Mr. Northrup was soon droning on about them, to the extent that Ivy nearly fell asleep as they travelled to the church.

Nearly.

For there was one large, exuberant man who didn't seem to have any inclination to leave her side who made sure that was not at all possible.

* * *

THE ENTIRE EVENING WAS EXCRUCIATING. And it was all because of Ivy Northrup.

After the luncheon that had ended rather disastrously, Everett had nearly convinced himself to pack up and leave Cedarworth Manor.

He likely would have if it wasn't for Charles, who was quite obviously enjoying himself. Everett had already dragged him here, and now he felt far too guilty to drag him away.

And then of course, there was Ivy herself. As much as Everett knew that he *should* leave, he wasn't a good enough man to actually do so. All the reasons that he wasn't right for her were the same reasons that he couldn't leave her either.

When he had finally talked himself into walking downstairs and entering that drawing room, he had nearly lost all reason and rushed across the room to take her into his arms. Until he saw Judith Bradley, which had brought him out of his foolishness quickly enough.

But to ride with Ivy in the carriage, to sit next to her in the church, to smell her scent of ripe peaches and cherry blossoms the entire service as he longed to reach out and take her hand or stroke the smooth satin of her dress, nearly undid him.

He had been distracted for a time by the memories the church service had evoked. As soon as he had stepped into St. Peter's Cathedral, he had been catapulted back to his youth, and all of the Sundays he had sat in this very same pew, staring at the painted nave ceiling and the golden high altar, with the many paintings of Jesus and Mary staring down at him.

Nothing had changed — except Father Kris. He sounded the same, read the same sermon he likely had twenty years ago. His beard was

now completely white, his stomach rounder, and his movements slower.

His memory was as sharp as ever, however, for once the service was over and they were all preparing to leave, he found his way to Everett's elbow.

"Everett Pine," he said in that low, calming voice of his, "it is good to see you, son."

"Father Kris," Everett said, the warmth in his smile true. He had always liked the vicar. Even though Everett hadn't always been the most faithful of the flock, Father Kris had never seemed to judge him, while most of the congregation hadn't seemed to have any problem in doing so. "It's good to see you."

His brown eyes assessed him thoughtfully. "What brings you home?"

"My mother," Everett said, finding her across the room. "She seemed to think that there was much awaiting me here. I'm not entirely sure about that, but it has been good to see most of the family again."

"A mother will never forget one of her sons," Father Kris said, pausing for a moment before adding, "nor a father."

Everett had no response to that, for he knew exactly what his father thought of his return, but he wasn't about to debate the topic with a man of the cloth.

"Miss Northrup is a lovely young woman, isn't she?"

Everett whipped his head toward the vicar, wondering just how he knew that she was on his mind. Father Kris laughed.

"I do not know what is going on in your head, son, but I saw her walking in on your arm. You seemed particularly enraptured with her."

Everett cleared his throat. "She is... a joy."

Which was true. It was exactly the right word to describe Ivy. He just didn't deserve such joy in his life. He stared at her across the church, where she was speaking to Charles as she awaited Everett near the entrance. She was so lively, so vibrant, so effervescent. He could see why she felt stifled in a town like Peterborough, why no man had seemed to suit her. A strange sense of pride built up in Everett's chest that she knew herself well enough not to settle, that she had refused to allow any man to tame her spirit.

"You are worthy of her," Father Kris said gently, as though he could read Everett's mind. "Our past does not define us."

Everett laughed gruffly, wanting to deny the vicar's words but instead just shaking his head. "She is too good for the likes of me, Father."

"Do not think so little of yourself," the vicar said, placing a hand

on Everett's shoulder for a moment. "And allow her the opportunity to decide for herself."

With that, he patted his hand a couple of times on Everett's shoulder as though he wanted to say more, but thought better of it. "Happy Christmas, son," he said, and Everett murmured back, "Happy Christmas, Father," wanting to say more but not knowing how to ask what he needed.

Then Ivy's gaze caught him from across the room, and an instant calming peace filled him.

It might not be forever, but for now, he would take refuge in it. In her.

It was Christmas, after all.

The fire raged rather cheerfully in the grate, drawing Ivy's contemplation — and contentment. Part of that was due to the fullness of her stomach after the most amazing meal she had ever indulged in. She was never one to hold back for the sake of decorum, especially when one was treated to the fruits of the hunting grounds, the river, and the conservatory from an estate like Cedarworth. Mince pies, oysters, wild fowl, venison, pork, enough soups to fill a bathtub, and then every dessert one could dream of. By the time Ivy had made her way through the Christmas pudding, the cakes, the gingerbread, and trifle, she nearly couldn't move.

But there was more to it. It was the general atmosphere of the house party, of all who were in attendance and the glow of Christmas that surrounded them. She had resisted this Christmas, this party, but despite the questions it raised, one thing was for certain — it wasn't boring.

Primarily because of Everett, of course, but the entire party held an air of not only nostalgia but also merriment that she hadn't encountered in quite some time.

At the moment, Everett and his eldest brother, Lord Lakeland, or Jeffrey as she had known him in their youth, were engaged in a rather lively, vocal, and competitive game of charades along with a few others who had volunteered to play. Ivy was usually one to join in, but tonight she was content in sitting back and enjoying all that was in front of her.

Actually, truth be told, she was rather tired from some of her late nights, whether they be out in the middle of the grounds with Everett or lying in bed considering what he might think of her. She could, perhaps, close her eyes for a moment and no one would notice...

"Ivy, I have been trying to get you alone all evening."

Ivy forced a smile on her face for Judith. She loved her friend, but she was growing rather weary of her accusations toward Everett, who had certainly never professed to be a perfect saint.

"It was a lovely service, tonight, was it not?" Ivy asked as she tried to focus on the glow of the fire again, only now instead of soothing

contentment, it was only offering a threatening flame.

"It was fine, of course," Judith said, waving away the comment with a flick of her hand, her gold and ruby jewels glittering in the gleam surrounding them. "However, I could not help but notice that you arrived on Everett's arm, and that he accompanied you in the carriage, no less."

"Along with my parents," Ivy pointed out, and Judith scoffed.

"He has basically announced his intentions to court you, but Ivy, I do hope you are not so naïve."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Ivy asked, pushing herself up so that her posture was as tall and rigid as Judith's.

"Only that you must not raise your hopes for a man like him." Judith sniffed. "If he refused to marry me, after all—"

Ivy lifted a finger, interrupting her friend. "He was to *marry* you? I thought it was all a misunderstanding."

"Yes, one in which he forced himself on me, and then when we were found by his father, he refused to do right by me."

"But nothing happened."

"It basically did."

Ivy rubbed her forehead. "I'm not sure I understand."

Nor did she particularly want to, but Judith obviously wasn't pleased that Ivy wasn't following as quickly as she would like.

"Everett Pine is a man who enjoys women, Ivy. Many women. He doesn't care what class you are from or what the expectations might be. He will continue to enjoy multiple women and has no desire in settling down. The sooner you understand that, the better."

Ivy would never admit to Judith — and hardly could to herself — that this entire conversation was causing a sickening dread to fill her stomach. She forced herself to raise her chin and pretend that it didn't bother her in the least.

"It's fine, Judith. Are we having a passing Christmas flirtation? Perhaps. But that is all. I have no expectations on him nor he on me."

"That is all well and good. I just hope that you understand what his *expectations* might be."

"I trust him," was all Ivy said, not wanting to give any of her own desires away. The truth was, she had no idea what Everett expected of her. Sure, they had shared a kiss or two — perhaps a bit more — but instead of causing her to run the other way, it only left her wanting to continue.

"Well," Judith said, rising, obviously entirely displeased with the conversation, "I have done all I can."

"Thank you for your concern," Ivy said, standing herself, not wanting to leave Judith — nor the evening — on such a sour note. "I promise that I will take care of myself. Oh, and Judith?"

“Yes?”

“Please cease sharing all of this with my mother.” She smiled at her in what she hoped seemed a friendly manner, but her jaw was tight, her teeth clenched. It was obvious where the “rumor” had come from, and she was beginning to wonder just how good of a friend Judith truly was.

“I never would,” Judith said, placing a hand on her breast with a gasp. “I can hardly believe you would think that of me.”

“Well, be that as it may, I do appreciate your discretion,” Ivy said with polite iciness that Lady Walsingham would be proud of. “I think I am going to go upstairs now. Goodnight, Judith. And Happy Christmas.”

“Same to you,” Judith said, the tension still thick between them.

The room had already begun to empty, and was much more silent than it had been before their conversation. Ivy felt herself being watched, and turned to see Everett leaning back against the marble pillar at the side of the room. Rather than being anything threatening, his gaze was a warming embrace, and the smile began to slowly spread on Ivy’s face as she returned his look.

She inclined her head toward the door, hoping he would understand her meaning, before she said goodnight to her parents as well as Lord and Lady Walsingham.

She didn’t retire to her bedroom, however, but to the small library at the back of the house — the place where they had agreed to meet should the situation ever warrant it.

Now, all she had to do was wait.

* * *

AS HE HAD WITNESSED the conversation between Ivy and Judith, Everett had been certain that she would want nothing more to do with him — which he should have expected, after all that had occurred between them.

Which was why Ivy’s seductive smile and invitation had surprised him — and fired everything within him.

He wanted her with a desperation that he had never felt before, a desperation that scared him — but he wasn’t going to do anything about it. He couldn’t. She was not that woman, he reminded himself, remaining for one more drink so as not to capture the attention of anyone who might be watching his actions. Fortunately, Judith and her husband retired shortly after Ivy, as did his mother and Mrs. Northrup.

Instead of announcing his departure, he simply placed his glass on the sideboard and left the room with a wave to only Charles, who

winked at him, in full awareness of what he was doing — but Everett knew that if there was anyone he could trust, it was the man who had remained his friend through everything that had approached them in life.

His heart beat double the time of his feet as he walked the long corridor to the back of the house, meeting no one along the way although he did hear the odd murmur and giggle from behind closed doors.

He thought back to the last time he had been caught in one of these rooms in such a situation, but quickly shook away the recollection. Now was not the time for such nasty thoughts. It was, perhaps, time to replace them with memories that he would look back on with much more warmth and joy.

Everett pushed open the door of the library, not wanting to scare Ivy if she was within but wanting her to know that he was there.

“Hallo?” he called out softly, but then suddenly he was jumped on from behind.

“Boo!”

He let out a strangled yelp that he was immediately rather embarrassed about.

Ivy’s surprisingly strong arms wrapped around his shoulders as she laughed into his neck, and after a moment he released a shaky sigh and chuckled along with her, even though it was at his own expense.

“I scared you,” she said with glee, and he shook his head at her.

“You did not.”

“Oh, but I did,” she said with a wicked grin, her face just visible in the light of the moon shining through the large sash windows and the embers of the fire remaining in the grate. Through the Christmas party, his mother ensured that each room was welcoming to the guests, but it was growing rather late as they had all begun to retire. “I wish you could see your face.”

“You will have to describe it for me, instead.”

“Very well,” she said, circling around so that she was standing in front of him. She lifted her hands to his face, beginning just below his hairline, her bare fingertips against his temples, her thumbs resting in the centre of his forehead.

“You have strong bones,” she said, and he grinned.

“Is that a compliment?”

“Of course it is,” she said as her fingers began a slow descent downward, leaving fire in their wake despite the coolness of her skin. “You have very prominent cheekbones and quite a perfect nose.”

He stayed silent this time, knowing that Ivy would never provide him with false compliments but nor would she insult him. He would simply have to take her at her word.

Her thumbs stopped just below his nose and above his lips, before she slowly trailed one index finger over them, her other hand cupping his chin.

“And your lips...”

“Yes?” he murmured, not wanting to move his mouth too much in case it would cause her to stop. Her touch was featherlight and yet he had never felt anything so remarkable.

“They are so soft yet so... strong.”

He unconsciously licked his lips, but when his tongue came in contact with her finger, they both stilled, staring at one another for a moment — and then he couldn't have said who moved first, but soon enough they were practically fused together, their lips on one another. There was nothing soft nor gentle about their meeting, but rather there was a passionate current flowing through them, one that Everett couldn't have said where it began nor ended. As they clasped one another tightly, their mouths meeting in a parry of tongues, an exploration of lips, a hunger to be closer than was currently possible, he wondered at this explosion of need from deep within him and at her response, as fervent as his own.

They drank one another in, and he backed her across the room, toward the grouping of furniture in front of the fire. When the back of his knees came in contact with the sofa, he dropped down into it, pulling her up so that she was sitting on his lap, straddling him, and he whisked away the volume of her skirts which he had so admired earlier in the evening.

She took his face back between her hands as she had earlier, dropping kisses on him before returning to his mouth and drinking him in.

Damn, but he couldn't get enough of her. Her hair in his fingers, her sweet scent surrounding him, her warmth filling him, her breasts pressed against his chest, the centre of her on top of his lap, pressing into him with such invitation that he longed to undo the fall of his breeches and find her beneath her skirts.

What it would feel like to sink into her, to know her warmth, her tightness, the feel of her that he just knew would be a silky smooth, perfect fit...

He groaned at the thought as she seemed to read his mind, for she ground herself into him, and Everett just about flipped her over and took her right there — but it was the intensity of that very need that finally brought him back to himself as he wrenched his mouth away from hers, although that didn't help matters much, for he found when he leaned his head forward, it was only to rest it against her bodice, which was already pushed lower than would be thought acceptable.

“Ivy,” he muttered, shaking his head back and forth, not knowing

what else to say as he wrestled with himself and his desire for her.

“Why did you stop?” she asked, her own voice low and raspy, causing his desire to grow, something he never would have thought possible.

“Why?” He gaped at her. “Because... if I didn’t stop now, I never would have been able to. And I can hardly take your innocence here in the middle of the library of my parents’ house.” He paused. “Or ever, I suppose.”

“Because you have no intentions of anything further with me beyond this house party,” she said, and Everett’s head snapped up at the intensity of her words.

“Ivy, I thought—”

“I know what you thought,” she said, extricating herself from him and backing up away from him. Immediately missing her presence, Everett stretched out a hand to draw her back, but she didn’t seem to have any interest in coming near him at the moment.

“I’m sorry,” he said, running a hand through his hair, not entirely knowing what he was sorry for besides that they had found themselves in such a situation.

“I’m being foolish,” she muttered, turning her back to him as she adjusted her clothing. “It’s just...”

“Just what?” he asked, standing and walking towards her, unable to keep himself from resting his hands lightly on her shoulders, relieved when she didn’t push them away.

She whirled around to face him, her green eyes glistening with an intensity that he could see even in the dim light of the room. “You didn’t seem to have any issue with pursuing Judith despite the fact that you had no intentions of marrying her.”

Shit. Judith. As much as he would prefer to never see the woman again, he also wished she was here so that he could tell her exactly what he thought of her and the words and stories she was filling Ivy’s head with.

“I never—”

She took a step even closer so that there was no space left between them. She lifted a finger, holding it up in front of his face. “Don’t lie to me. Whatever you do, please don’t lie. Now, tell me, what happened between the two of you?”

Ivy had told herself that she wasn't going to press him. That he had never promised her anything, that she had no reason to ask him to explain himself to her.

But when he had denied her, when he had pushed her away, she had found herself filled with jealousy that surprised and disappointed her. What was it about her that held him back when he had obviously been perfectly willing to accept and pursue Judith?

Everett ran one hand over her shoulder, down her arm, tracing her wrist until he finally took her hand.

"Come sit with me — please? I'll explain it all to you, I promise."

She considered his request before she nodded curtly. "Very well."

Ivy followed him over to one of the small alcoves before the window, sitting beside him as she tried not to think about all that had just happened between them on this very sofa. Had she not stopped, she would have given herself to him, she knew that. And she couldn't say that she was glad he had resisted.

He didn't press her to sit close to him, but instead he bent one knee onto the sofa as he turned to her and took her hands in his. She left them there, enjoying the warmth of his touch despite her annoyance at him. She kept her eyes on their hands, noting how much bigger his were than hers, how they actually made hers look somewhat dainty, which she never would have thought possible.

"It's a long story," he said, rubbing his forehead, and she had the sense that it was one he hadn't told anyone before — that perhaps, the only people who might know the entirety of the story were those who were intricately involved. "It might not make sense as to why I am starting here at first, but hopefully it will in the end."

She nodded, trusting that he would tell her all that she needed to know.

He cleared his throat, his eyes drawing past her toward the corner of the room, where she knew bookshelves lined it, currently hiding in the darkness.

"You know that my father arranged for me to go to London. I went to Eton, where I studied the law. When I finished, I followed the

arrangement to enter into the Inns of Courts, while also working and apprenticing for a barrister — a friend of my father's."

"Mr. Jackson."

"Benjamin Jackson, yes," he confirmed, and Ivy was shocked when his features nearly twisted with what could only be described as disgust. "Everything was fine, at least at first. I enjoyed the work. I had always been a bit of trouble in school, although that could be said for many young men my age. I played a few too many pranks, stayed out late, missed curfew, and when I began in the Courts, I can't say that I settled down much. I didn't attend nearly as many dinners as Jackson would have liked. It was part of the schooling, you see, that we are supposed to have dinners with the barrister we're working with."

Ivy nodded, nothing too shocking about the story thus far.

"As I've told you about barristers, they don't like to get their hands dirty. They stay apart from those they believe would be beneath them. Jackson had a case and asked me to try to find evidence that this man was innocent."

"And?"

"He was guilty as hell," Everett said, the contempt in his voice telling her that whatever had happened, Everett was as upset about it now as he had been years before. "Not only did I find nothing that would speak to his innocence, but I discovered that the client had ruthlessly murdered the man. Had planned it all, then took the man's livelihood, stole everything from the man's wife and children. Left them with nothing. They were destitute, and he didn't care. No one did. Certainly not Jackson. When I told him there was nothing to prove his innocence, he told me that it didn't matter — that my job then, was to fabricate evidence that would make it seem that way."

"So what did you do?" Ivy asked, knowing that this story mustn't end well — at least, not for Everett.

He squeezed her hand gently, as though sensing her trust in him.

"I told Jackson that I had the evidence that would prove the man's innocence. Jackson didn't work a hard day in his life, so he went to the trial without checking it ahead of time. When he produced the evidence, it not only convicted his client without any doubt but made Jackson look the fool."

"I'm assuming that did not go over well," Ivy murmured, hiding her shock as well as her admiration. To have the gumption to go against a man who could and did ruin his career was not something most men would even contemplate let alone follow through on. Despite her initial annoyance, her respect for Everett grew.

"A slight understatement," Everett said with a snort. "Jackson may have been lazy, but he was not stupid. He didn't just let me go.

Instead, he made sure that I could never successfully work again.”

“In what way?”

“He told me I could continue apprenticing with him. That I had a lot to learn but he still saw potential in me, and because of his friendship with my father and my father’s influence, that he would forgive me. I had no wish to continue, but part of me hoped that if I stayed, I could make a difference, try to find other people to help.”

“I’m assuming it didn’t work out that way.”

His eyes had glazed over, and Ivy wondered if he was even truly here in the room with her anymore or if he had retreated somewhere else, back into his past and whatever had obviously shaped the rest of his life.

“No. He created an entire scheme that would defraud me. Accused me of planting evidence, had one of his clients say that I slept with his wife in order to put it into his bedroom.”

“Which wasn’t true?” Ivy asked, hoping that he didn’t hear the question in her voice. She didn’t want to believe he would do such a thing, yet part of her wondered whether a piece of the story might be true.

“No,” he said with such vehemence that she couldn’t help but believe him. “Not only had I not slept with the woman, I had never even met her. But whether through bribery or threat, Jackson was able to convince them to go along with his scheme. After his accusation, he also reported me to the other barristers and added that I had stolen from him.”

“Did you refute him?”

“I tried, but he is well-established. I might have had a chance if my father had supported me, but...”

“That’s why you had the falling out?” Ivy asked, her heart dropping as she realized how much it must have hurt him.

“I came home to tell him my side of the story, in the hopes that he would back me. His word would go further than Jackson’s. But instead, he questioned what I was doing with the woman, why I would embarrass him so. I had a bit of a reputation with women as it was. Jackson used that to make his story believable.”

“Did you tell him all that Jackson did?” Ivy asked earnestly, wondering how a father could so disown his child.

“I was going to,” Everett muttered. “But when he immediately believed Jackson’s story before even giving me the chance to explain... I decided that I didn’t want his backing. I would rather make my own way and fend for myself.”

“But your mother believed you?”

“I don’t know what she thinks happened,” Everett said, shrugging one shoulder, “but she either believed in me or forgave me. While my

father told me to leave and never come back, my mother has always kept in touch, encouraging me to return. I know that she would love nothing more than to see my father and me reconcile but... every chance that has come up has only led to further distance between us.”

“And Judith factored into all of this somehow?” Ivy had to ask, feeling foolish for even bringing it up again but needing to know the entirety of the story.

“When I came back to speak with my father, it was at a Christmas house party just like this one — you were there, I think.”

“Likely,” she said, remembering the last time she had seen him, unable to forget him, but knowing that he likely had barely noticed her, although in his defence, she had still been practically a child.

“I was waiting for my father in one of the parlors when Judith came in. I had thought at first that she had mistaken me for another, but as it turned out, she knew perfectly well that I was there. I was her target.”

“Her target?” Ivy had a feeling where this story was going, and she was sure she would likely have to choose whether to believe Everett or her friend.

He threw his hands up in the air. “She came into the parlor like a cat who had cornered a mouse, leaving him with nowhere to run. She seemed to believe that she was doing me a favor, that I was lucky she had happened upon me. She told me it could be quick, and would be our secret, that she had done it before and had no issue in doing so again. That she had seen me come in through the back of the house, had noticed how upset I seemed and promised that she could cheer me up.”

“And did she?” Ivy asked, swallowing hard even as she asked the question. Why it mattered, she had no idea. Everett had a past, she knew that. Even if nothing had happened with Judith, she was well aware that it had with other women. Many other women. But somehow, when it was someone she knew, someone who was close to her....

“No,” Everett said gruffly, shaking his head. “I won’t lie and say that perhaps it wouldn’t have been a tempting offer at another time, but I was far too preoccupied with the ensuing confrontation with my father, besides my suspicion of the sudden overture from a woman I barely knew. I told her I was flattered but was expecting my father to join me at any moment. When I saw the look in her eyes, I realized that she was already aware of that, and it was the very reason she had come into the room — she *wanted* to be caught.”

Listening to his words, Ivy knew without a doubt that they were true. How many times had Judith expressed her wish to become a woman of means, to marry a man with title? Everett might not exactly

have a title, but he was as connected as any man could be without being first in line.

As glad as she was that Everett hadn't lied to her, the taste of betrayal from her friend was a bitter one.

"I'm assuming your father walked in at a rather inopportune time?"

"He did," Everett said, his words oozing with bitterness. "Any chance then for me to explain to him what had happened, that I was innocent in the matter, fled. That was the last time I saw him."

"Until this Christmas."

Everett nodded. "I thought maybe my mother invited me back here because she had some knowledge that my father might be inclined to forgive me, but she was being as foolishly hopeful as I was."

"Did your father expect you to marry Judith?"

"He asked if I would," Everett said, his entire body becoming rigid at the reminder. "I refused. I wasn't going to let a woman like that win, no matter what it meant for my own reputation. Mine was already ruined and she had made her own bed."

Ivy looked down for a moment, finally understanding all that he had gone through, his reluctance to come home, and why he would be suspicious of all and full of contempt for his family. And yet still, he retained that air of joy, the laughter and humor that seemed to guide his life. She thought of Charles Morris, and how much it must have meant to Everett to have a friend who believed in him.

Another thought occurred to her — one that perhaps spoke to some of his hesitation with her.

"Everett..." she began, trying to choose her words carefully so that he wouldn't read too much into them or wonder whether or not she had the same goals as Judith. "I just want you to know that I have no designs such as Judith. I would never use you like that. Even if something were to... happen between us, I would never expect you to make any promises based on that alone."

He regarded her with some contemplation, but then finally nodded his understanding.

"I know that. I do. But just the same, I would never want to put you in that position where you would be left ruined."

Ivy sat back, away from him.

"That is such a terrible term, isn't it?"

"What — ruined?"

"Yes," she said, shuddering at the thought of it. "A man can take his pleasure where he chooses and it's, what, just being a man? But should a woman choose to do the same she is apparently unfit for any other man to want her."

Everett blinked, and when she could barely make out his

expression, Ivy saw that the fire was nearly extinguished and the room had grown cold, but she had hardly realized it as she had been so intrigued by his story.

“I — well, I suppose I had never thought of it like that before.”

“Most men don’t,” Ivy said with a shrug. “Most *people* don’t.”

“I’m sorry, Ivy.”

“Don’t be,” she said, forcing a smile on her face. “I never asked for sympathy. I don’t want any. I just wish that I could do as I please without the judgement, without the expectations.” A sigh slipped out. “Perhaps someday.”

“Perhaps,” Everett responded, but she could tell that he was off-centre, unsure, and Ivy instantly regretted saying anything when he had been so vulnerable with her.

She placed a hand lightly on his arm.

“Thank you for sharing your story, Everett,” she said. “I’m sorry that happened to you. For what it’s worth — I believe you. And what you did is more than admirable. Most people would never have done the same thing, would have been far too worried about their own careers. I commend you. And I know that you will make a name for yourself in whatever you do.”

“Thank you,” Everett said, reaching out a hand and cupping her face.

Ivy couldn’t help but lean into it, his warmth running through her.

“Now, off to bed with you.”

Ivy nodded, even as disappointment filled her that he wanted to be rid of her so quickly. Although she supposed it was late.

“Goodnight,” she said softly, and he rubbed his thumb over her cheek, just beside her nose.

“Goodnight, Ivy.” His words were soft, like a caress, and when he leaned in, kissing her gently, she knew that it would keep her warm for the rest of the night.

Everett woke the next morning feeling renewed — refreshed even. He supposed it had something to do with sharing his story. A weight seemed to have been lifted from him, one that he had been carrying around for far too long now.

“What happened?” Charles asked him as he ran into him just outside the breakfast room.

Everett stopped, staring at him with confusion. “What do you mean?”

“You look different.”

“Different how?”

“I don’t know,” Charles said before laughing. Everett took enjoyment in their bantering. He and Charles had always been closer than Everett had ever been to his own brother, and while they would often argue, they would always continue on as though nothing had happened.

Charles was also the only one — besides Ivy, now — who actually knew the entirety of his story, who never questioned him, who had always believed in him.

For that, Everett would be forever grateful.

Charles practically waggled his eyebrows at him. “Did you, ah,” he looked around, “you know.”

“No!” Everett exclaimed, even though he had in actual fact been rather close to doing... the you know. “We had a conversation.”

“A *conversation*?” Charles snorted incredulously. “With Miss Northrup?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“And... she understood.”

“You told her about... everything?”

“I did.”

“Interesting,” Charles said, inclining his head. “Perhaps there is more to this than I originally thought.”

“Think nothing more of it.”

“Very well,” Charles said, following Everett as he walked away and

into the breakfast room, where a smattering of guests had already been seated.

Everett nearly turned around and walked out when he saw that his father earnestly reigned at the head of the table, but with Ivy's belief in him bolstering his confidence, he took a breath and nodded a greeting to all in the room. Silence descended for a moment as he received a few stares, but when neither he nor his father reacted, conversation resumed and Everett filled his breakfast plate.

Footsteps sounded on the hard wood just outside the door and Everett didn't have to look up to know who was there. He could sense her, smell her, even above the aroma of the meats on the table before him and the greenery wafting down from the ceiling above and the table centrepieces.

It had taken every single bit of willpower within him — not that he had an overly large store — to walk away from her last night. He had always been so indignant about all that had happened to him that he never wanted to share it, so convinced he had been that whoever he told would never believe him, would do as his father and the rest of his family did and trust the word of another.

But Ivy had believed him. Had trusted in what he had to say, hadn't wavered for a moment — even when it had been his word against that of one of her closest friends.

Why she was friends with Judith Bradley, he had no idea. Ivy was as good of a woman as Judith was evil, in his opinion — not that anyone had asked him.

She took the empty seat beside him, smiling her good morning to him as she did anyone else. But then she reached under the table and squeezed his leg, and he had to force back the grin at her cheekiness. He had never found a woman who matched him so, who was able to respond to every one of his jokes or tricks with one of her own.

It was too bad that she was a woman he could never have, who he would never be good enough for. Her mother only had her sights on him for her daughter because he was the son of an earl.

Sights that would fade if she had learned the truth about who he was, what he did. He couldn't provide for Ivy, not with the life he was currently living.

He was pulled from his reverie by his father's voice from the head of the table. He commanded the attention of all in the room, apparently having an announcement of sorts.

"We will be welcoming another house guest today."

"After Christmas?" Phyllis asked, and he nodded.

"He was visiting with his own family and will stop in for a few days on his way back to London."

"Who is it?" Phyllis asked, but as his father's eyes came to rest

upon him, Everett's heart began to sink as he knew by his father's expression just who it was.

"Mr. Jackson."

"Oh." Phyllis sat there in shocked silence, her mouth in a round O as she realized what that would mean for Everett. "How... lovely for him to see you."

"Yes," their father continued. "I hope *all* will be welcoming to him."

Everett leaned back from the table, his appetite vanished. Ivy's hand came to rest on his thigh once more, this time much softer and not in the cheeky way from earlier. He wanted to push it away, not caring for her sympathy, but when she gave him a little squeeze, he realized that she was just trying to support him.

If it wouldn't have given his father the satisfaction of knowing that he had achieved his goal of rattling him, Everett would have stood up and walked out of the room, but he forced himself to sit there, even if it was in stony silence while his father continued on as to the various comings and goings of the rest of the guests.

Finally, the interminable breakfast was over, and Everett pushed back from the table, before anyone — including Ivy — could intercept him, and took to the stairs. He needed some fresh air. He would go fetch Spirit then take him outside. Thank goodness he had an excuse to leave the rest of them.

Only, when he and his enthusiastic dog descended the stairs, making for the back doors of the library, he found that he was not to have any time alone.

"I heard about our visitor."

There was nothing that happened within this household that his mother didn't know. She stood there, cloak wrapped around her, a regal fur hat covering her silver hair, her hands stuffed within a muff. The servants, despite working for his father, were most loyal to her, and everything made its way back to her sooner or later.

"Mother," he said with a nod, "is it not too cold for you to venture out today?"

"Are you suggesting that I do not know my mind nor the weather?" she asked, tilting her head to look at him, though Everett knew that she meant no ill will, but rather was teasing him in her own way.

"Not at all," he said, holding out his elbow. "Shall we?"

He led her out the door, making sure that Spirit didn't knock her over as he bounded around their feet in excitement at a new friend to play with. His mother didn't seem to mind the dog's companionship, but she also wasn't the type of woman who would frolic through the yard with him.

Not like Ivy.

Would he ever be able to think of anything without being reminded of Ivy?

The day was as cold as the last few had been, and Everett shivered, not remembering such a chill from his winters and Christmases here as a youth. But then, he was likely moving at a much quicker pace back then, or having so much fun that he didn't even notice the temperature.

"I am sorry that Mr. Jackson is coming here," his mother said as she stood on the bottom step of the terrace, likely protecting her shoes from the grass, which was wet with the melted snow. "I had no idea your father invited him. Please know that I never would have asked him myself."

"I know," Everett said as he stood on the grass just below her, his hands in his pockets as he stared out beyond, watching Spirit jump over the green space, catching imaginary butterflies as he seemed to fly with the wind that whipped around him.

"I'm sure there is a solution to all of this," she said, but Everett sighed, his breath foggy in the cool air of the day.

"There is," he said. "I should leave."

"Everett—"

"I should," he continued. "In fact, I never should have come. I only did so because I thought you were ill. You know you made it seem that way." He gave her a pointed look, and she had the humility to look chagrined.

"Perhaps."

Everett tilted his head. "I must ask you something."

"Very well."

"When Jackson accused me of planting false evidence, and when Judith Bradley accused me of trying to ruin her — did you believe all of that?"

His mother opened her mouth once, twice, as she was obviously trying to find the words to turn him down, but finally she just looked to the ground, her arms clasped behind her back.

"I always knew that you wouldn't have done anything with ill intent."

"What do you mean by that?" Everett asked, realizing that she was trying to be polite without actually lying to him.

"Everett, I know young men sometimes find themselves in... situations, but I am also sure that you never meant any harm."

"Jackson lied," Everett said, needing her to understand, no longer satisfied with her acceptance of what she thought to be true. "He's not a good man, Mother. He tried to involve me in a plot that would have seen a guilty man go free."

"Is that not his job? Your job?"

"Not when it means acting immorally. Creating evidence that wasn't there. Coercing people. Bribing people. That is not the way I want to live my life. Even if it means that I will never make a living for myself in what Father would consider a respectable way, at least I can hold my head high."

As usual, she kept her chin tight, not allowing any emotion to show.

"Sometimes, Everett, I do believe that you are a better man than the rest of us."

"Despite my shortcomings?" he said, raising an eyebrow.

"I never said that," she said, shaking her head. "No one is perfect."

"But some of us are disappointments."

He threw a stick for a waiting Spirit before turning to face her. "I don't want to make the house party awkward for you. I'll leave before Jackson gets here."

"Too late," she said with a sigh as she regarded him with her icy blue eyes. "He is nearly here already, and you cannot leave now."

"Mother—"

"It would be a scandal, Everett! Please stay?"

Everett couldn't remember another time he had ever heard her beg him for anything, so he knew she must be both serious and desperate.

"Very well. For a short time."

"Thank you! I've been thinking, Everett, I believe that Peterborough could use someone closer to service the area. Provide advice, draw up documents, that sort of thing. It would be so lovely to have you close to home again. Would you ever consider it?"

"You don't think I can make it by myself elsewhere, do you?"

"Not at all. I just thought perhaps here, where people have needs but already know you, you might find more work."

"Thank you, Mother, but I don't need a handout. I will stay, however, for a couple of days at least, on one condition — you must answer one more question."

She raised a brow as she waited.

"Why did you want to match me with Ivy Northrup?"

"Has that not gone rather well?" she said, no longer denying her intention.

"Even so, I need to know, Mother. Why her?"

"Because," she said, "she would be a good fit for you. You could settle down, start a family—"

"Return some respectability to the Walsingham name?"

"That has nothing to do with it," she said wearily, but he knew from the look in her eyes that it was rather a stretch of the truth. "I just think it would be good for you. And Miss Northrup hasn't been

particularly pleased with any of the young men from here, so I thought maybe you would be able to provide her with the life she is searching for.”

Everett said nothing else, for she had already answered his question — it was not so much *him* that was the proposed fit for Ivy, but his name, his homes, his lifestyle. It stung, and he wondered if Ivy felt the same as both of their mothers.

“Thank you, Mother.”

“For what?”

“For providing me with answers to the questions I was looking for,” he said, setting his own chin before he whistled and Spirit bounded back toward him. He could feel his mother’s worried gaze upon him as he started back for the house. “Come inside, Mother. It’s cold.”

“Very well,” she said. “But if you need anything, Everett, come to me, please?”

“Of course,” he said, placing a hand on the small of her back for a moment in a gesture to show her how much he loved her, even if he couldn’t find the words. “Thank you.”

He took one look back at the green beyond as Spirit barked and ran into the house before them, wondering if he would ever return after this Christmas season.

He highly doubted it would be so.

Ivy had wanted to follow Everett, but Lady Walsingham had intercepted her, gently telling her that she needed a chance to talk to her son, that she shouldn't worry, and that all would be well.

Ivy wasn't so sure.

She drifted over to the archway of the door leading into the library, smiling when she glanced over to the mantel to see her own "corner" decorated. She was actually proud that she hadn't done such a bad job, after all. She most certainly would never meet Lady Walsingham's standards, but then, she knew Everett's mother cared more that her guests were invested in the Christmas spirit.

Speaking of... Lady Walsingham stepped through the garden doors, the blast of winter air entering with her, but Everett remaining behind as Spirit had been distracted from his return to the house by a bird who flew past him.

Lady Walsingham smiled when she saw Ivy, placing a hand on her arm once she approached.

"He is lucky to have you in his life," she said, patting her arm. "He just doesn't yet understand that you are equally as lucky to have him."

Ivy opened her mouth, the denial of any relationship on her tongue, but Lady Walsingham stopped her. "You might not believe it now, I understand that, but give him a chance to come around. And never say never. It's Christmas after all."

Ivy smiled and nodded, not wanting to argue with Lady Walsingham, but knowing that what she said was likely hopeful optimism. "It is," she said instead, noncommittedly. It seemed to be enough for Lady Walsingham, who continued on her way, leaving Ivy to greet Everett when he came in. Spirit beat his owner in the door, apparently absolutely thrilled to see Ivy.

Of course, he was absolutely thrilled to see anyone who gave him the slightest bit of attention, but Ivy preferred to believe that he had a special place in his heart for her.

She hated to admit that she now wished his owner felt the same, although she wasn't sure whether or not there was any merit to that hope.

As he entered the room, he doffed his hat and shook it out, beginning to murmur unintelligible words that Ivy strove to hear — until she realized that they weren't directed at her, but at Spirit, making her smile.

Right before he reached her, he finally looked up. "Ivy!" he said in surprise. "I didn't see you there."

"No," she said, shaking her head with a chuckle. "You didn't."

He nodded, his expression solemn, with no hint of the smile he normally wore.

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

He visibly swallowed. "Of course."

"Does this have anything to do with the house party's newest arrival?"

He snorted, waving a hand in the air. "Of course not. I can handle looking the man in the face. In fact, I welcome it."

"Good," she said cautiously, although she wished that he would be more open with her. Remembering where they stood, she looked up, softly smiling at him. "Do you know where we are?"

"In the library?" he asked wryly, and she laughed.

"Under the mistletoe!"

"Oh," he said without any further expression, but he leaned in and kissed her softly on the lips, though without much passion. "Isn't Christmas over?"

"Of course not!" she said, her eyes widening. "Christmas lasts for twelve days! Oh, Everett, your mother would be so disappointed in you."

She said the words in jest, but the moment they came out of her mouth, she knew they were the wrong ones, as his already guarded expression became completely closed off.

"Everett, I didn't mean—"

"It's fine," he said brusquely. "No harm done. I best return Spirit upstairs before he tears through the rest of the house."

Ivy nodded, not knowing what else to say, for it seemed that everything she said was wrong. Instead, she followed him from the library and down the corridor — then nearly ran right into his back when he stopped abruptly right in the middle.

"Everett, I—"

But he was like an unmoving wall, and when Ivy peeked out around him, she saw why.

A tall, solemn, cold man was standing there in front of him, staring, his face full of what Ivy could only describe as controlled fury. "What are you doing here?" he bit out.

Everett responded with an icy coldness to his words that sent shivers up Ivy's spine. "This is my family home."

"Where you are no longer invited."

"Yes, you made sure of that, did you not?"

Ah. So this was the barrister who had tried to ruin Everett's life.

"You did that all on your own," the man continued, passing his hat to the butler, who was watching the exchange with undisguised curiosity, although as well trained as he was in his station, he didn't say a word. "Now, I shall go find Lord Walsingham — my friend."

Without so much as an excuse me, he pushed around them, although his eyes lingered on Ivy when he spotted her, running up and down her in a way that caused chills to creep down her spine.

"That would be the barrister?" Ivy said, and Everett nodded.

"If you will excuse me," he said, without another look at her before he took to the stairs, leaving Ivy behind — alone, ignored, and worried.

* * *

"WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?" Charles asked later that afternoon, perched on a chair in the corner of Everett's room — well, his guest room, not the room that he had grown up in, of course, with one leg crossed over the other, his foot bobbing as he watched Everett push through the clothing in his wardrobe, searching for something to wear for the evening. He couldn't afford a valet, and was certainly not using any of his parents' servants, so he dressed himself, as he had been doing for years now.

"I am going to show Jackson that his lies don't bother me. That I have a fine life as it is. Then I am going to return to London and the practice I have built myself."

"And what about Miss Northrup?"

"What about her?"

"Are you just going to leave her behind?"

"What else am I supposed to do?" Everett asked bitterly. "This is where she lives. I live elsewhere."

"Yes, but—"

"But what, Morris?" Everett bit out angrily. "I have no life to offer her. If her parents didn't already know what everyone else believes is the truth about me, I'm sure they will now that Jackson is here. I have nothing to offer her, and she deserves better."

"Isn't that for her to decide?"

"You sound like my mother."

"If you're going to leave," Charles said, pushing himself up from the chair and walking over to Everett, "why don't you just leave now? I've never seen you like this besides right after it all happened. It's not a good look on you, Pine."

"I want to prove all is well," he muttered.

"Just like you wanted to prove your mother wrong through this little scheme of yours with Miss Northrup? What about that?"

"That doesn't matter anymore. It was stupid of me to agree to it to begin with," Everett said, frustrated with his uncooperative cravat, pulling it from his neck in disgust. Charles snorted, took it from him, and helped him with it. Everett, knowing he was too worked up to finish it himself, allowed him to do so, until Charles patted him on the shoulder as they looked in the mirror.

"There," he said. "That will do. Now, come. Let's face this. I've got your back."

Everett sighed, turning to clasp Charles' hand and shaking it. "I do appreciate it. And I thank you. You're a better friend than I deserve, Morris. Maybe Ivy needs a man like you instead."

"I'm your friend because you are an upright chap and I enjoy being around you," Charles said. "You're not giving yourself enough credit. And as for Miss Northrup," he wagged his eyebrows. "Do you really want me to try for her?"

"No," Everett said, the idea filling him with deep jealousy, even though he was the one who'd suggested it. "You've made your point. Let's go."

When they arrived downstairs, the drawing room was nearly full of all of the guests who had joined them, Everett and Charles late as always. Everett had already had a few drinks upstairs to bolster his courage to face Jackson, but unlike when he typically imbibed, he wasn't his usual jovial self — tonight the drink only brought out his anger and bitterness, which he thought had escaped him years ago. Apparently, he had been wrong.

He could feel Jackson's gaze on him from across the room, and he had an idea that the man was annoyed that he had found his way back into his parents' house, from where he had likely hoped Everett had been exiled forever.

Well, Jackson hadn't counted on a mother's love.

"Everett!" Phyllis exclaimed as she crossed over to him and linked her arm through his. "And Mr. Morris. We were just about to start a game of Short Answers. Everett, you sit on one side of Miss Northrup, and Mr. Morris, you on the other. She just arrived."

When Everett saw Ivy again, shame at how he had spoken to her washed over him, but he just nodded. Now was not the time to discuss it. He called one of the footmen over to request a drink as the play began, and he had to force himself to concentrate on the questions and answers being asked around him, for the point of the game was that a question and answer could never be repeated.

Some questions were obviously flirtatious — what did one wear to

sleep, what was another word for a male bird, what held up a lady's stockings.

Not until he heard the voice, did he realize that Judith was on the other side of him, and he nearly groaned aloud. Could this night get any worse?

Even as he asked himself the question, he knew that he shouldn't have. For he was well aware that it could *always* get worse.

"Your turn, Lady Bradley," Phyllis said from across the circle, and Everett was vexed at her for putting Judith next to him, even though his sister didn't know about their past history — she had been away and married before it had all occurred, and it wasn't exactly a topic that would be included at any family reunions.

Judith looked over at him, her red lips turning into a smile that bode no good.

"What do you call a man who ruins young, innocent women?"

Everett narrowed his eyes, knowing what she wanted — what Jackson wanted, what his father wanted — to scare him away so that he would leave and never come back. But then he felt the slight pressure of Ivy's hand on his on the other side, and he held his head high as he said, "It depends on the circumstance. Many times, one might call him a monster. But to the circumstance to which you are referring? A victim."

There was a gasp around the circle, but he didn't care. Instead, he turned, looked Ivy in the eyes, and asked, "Under where is a perfectly acceptable kiss at Christmas?"

Her grin began slowly, spreading across her face, at the same speed that it warmed his body.

"Mistletoe," she said in such a way that made him want to kiss her right there, regardless of who was watching.

The game continued rather uneventfully until they made it around the circle, despite Judith's pouting beside him.

But it wasn't this game that was to be feared.

No, there was far more awaiting him across the room — in something that seemed as innocent as a game of chess.

Or so he thought.

When the games began, Everett would have preferred to take his leave, but Charles seemed eager to join, and Everett didn't want to leave him to the wolves alone, even though he knew Charles could defend himself.

Except it wasn't Charles who needed defending.

Pouring himself another glass of brandy to bolster his courage, Everett took a seat at the table, finding himself across from Jackson. His father's game board was set up across from Charles. Lord Walsingham eyed Everett judgmentally, and Everett realized with a sinking feeling exactly why his father had done this. To test him. To see if he could prove himself loyal to the family, willing to hide his true thoughts and feelings in order to be the second son of an earl, a man who would uphold all propriety above morals and his own code of honor.

Well, his father was to be disappointed.

Jackson had the black side of the chess board, Everett the white. When Everett picked up the marble pawn, the one in front of the queen, and moved it two spaces forward, he was transported back in time to when he and his father would spend countless nights together, here in this very parlor, bent over the chess board. But then Jackson spoke up, although his words were directed at Charles.

"Where are you from, son?" Jackson moved his own pawn, two spaces ahead of his bishop.

"Right here, in Peterborough," Charles said, and Everett studied the board, moving his bishop forward diagonally.

"I'm surprised I haven't heard of you, then." Jackson moved the pawn ahead of his rook up one space.

"My father is the apothecary," Charles explained without any apology while Everett took advantage of Jackson's distraction as he moved his bishop backward until it was at the edge of the board.

"Interesting," Jackson murmured as he moved another pawn forward. "And you've become friends with Pine, here?"

"Morris and I have been friends since we were children," Everett interjected, after moving a pawn. "That's never changed."

“Not even when you ruined your career?” Jackson asked, and all heads began swivelling back and forth between them as though they were watching a battledore and shuttlecock match. “As it happens, I have a client who is guilty as can be, I’m sure of it. I could hire you — give you a job as I know how sorely you need one. Perhaps you could help me with those skills of yours? Plant some evidence in his home? I’m sure his wife wouldn’t mind *letting you in*.”

Everett tried to tamp down his fury. He was not a man who easily angered, but despite his usual easy demeanor, his rage, when summoned, could burn with equal passion.

He slowly leaned forward. “Your accusations are baseless.”

“Are they, though?” Jackson asked with a smirk as he took the bait and his pawn took Everett’s bishop.

Everett looked to his father, knowing that he wasn’t going to get any support there, but wondering what he thought of this conversation.

Instead, his father just stared at him, eyebrows raised, waiting for him to respond.

“I know who I am,” he said slowly, ignoring all of the other men who watched him. “I did what was right, not what was asked of me. I’ll not get into a battle of who said what. All you need to know is I am a man of morals and I am happy with who I am. I care nothing of what you think.”

He said it to Jackson but looked over at his father so he knew that he was included in that statement. He moved his queen into position. “You’ve no more moves. I think I am done here for the evening.”

Everett pushed himself back from the table and walked over to the sideboard. He would have more luck with another glass of brandy than with this lot.

Charles followed, leaning a hip against the Egyptian sideboard.

“You didn’t have to leave the games,” Everett said, not looking at him but rather out the window in front of him. “You won. You should have continued, taken all the money you could from Jackson.”

“I lost my appetite for the game,” Charles said as he took sips of his own drink. “Why don’t you just tell your father the truth of what happened?”

“He never gave me the chance before,” Everett said, noting as he did that his bitterness had become much more... sadness. “Why would he now, after all these years have passed? When he invited Jackson here, to the same house party I had returned for?”

“Fair enough,” Charles said with his usual easy, accepting demeanor. “What would you like to do, then?”

“Drink with me?”

Charles grinned. “That, I can do.”

IVY COULD DO nothing but watch Everett finish one drink after another. She didn't know what had transpired at the chess table, but between the two games, it was obvious that he had been hurt or betrayed or angered, and didn't seem inclined to come to her with whatever was causing his pain.

She tried not to let it bother her, but it reminded her that whatever was between the two of them was nothing more than a flirtation. He sat away from her at dinner, which he barely ate but instead sat through silently, caressing his drink. When the ladies retired after dinner, she wondered if this might be one of the last times she would see him before one of them left, for she couldn't imagine him staying much longer at a house party where he was far from enjoying himself.

When the men finally rejoined them in the drawing room, he ignored her as he did the rest of the party, but Ivy could see his gait was altered, his movements sloppy, and she prayed he would just go to bed and not do anything else that would only worsen the situation.

After he left, she breathed a sigh of relief, wondering if she should go after him, but decided against it, knowing that the addition of a fair bit of drink would likely only aggravate everything between them.

She rubbed her eyes, tired of this, of the situation, of wondering what would happen with Everett. This was supposed to be a bit of fun, but had become far too serious, and she sensed deep within her that someone was going to get hurt — if they hadn't been already.

Ivy rose, wishing her mother and the other ladies goodnight before excusing herself. Her steps were slow as she continued down the corridor and up the stairwell, strings of garland guiding her way.

She continued down the hallway, stopping suddenly when she heard a shout from behind one of the doors. What was she supposed to do? Was someone hurt? Had someone forced himself upon a woman? Ivy pressed her ear against the door, frozen by indecision.

Then she heard a familiar laugh — Judith's. She would know it anywhere. She frowned at the door, knowing that this wasn't Judith's room, but—oh dear. Sickening dread filled her stomach as she counted the doors, realizing that this was, indeed, Everett's room. The bark from within confirmed it.

"Oh. Hallo, there."

Ivy whirled around, surprised to find Charles Morris standing behind her, scratching his temple as he wobbled unsteadily on drunken legs. He was looking back and forth from her to the door of the room with a great sense of unease.

"I'm not spying," she said defensively, "I just heard a noise."

Charles cringed, as though he wished she wasn't here, and Ivy realized quite quickly just why that might be. "He's in there with someone?"

"Well..." Charles hiccupped, and Ivy rolled her eyes at how useless the drunk man had become before she made her assumptions about the situation, removed her attention from him, and pushed open the door.

She sighed. It was as she had figured.

There was Everett, flopped in the chair in the corner of the room, nearly lost in the dark with the deep greens of the walls surrounding him.

Judith was leaning over top of him, her hands running down his shirt as she began to unbutton it, while Everett half-heartedly slapped her hands away.

"Enough," he mumbled, and Ivy cleared her throat from her place at the entrance, crossing her arms over her chest as Judith turned around and looked at her without any hint of surprise, her smirk obvious.

"Oh, Ivy. What are you doing here?" She brought her hands to her mouth as though to show how dismayed she was at being caught, but Ivy knew better. This was likely exactly what Judith had planned.

"Judith, leave him alone," Ivy said, her hands on her hips. "He's obviously too drunk to even stand, and why you thought to try to use that to your advantage again, I have no idea, but you're married now, and I would have thought you were better than this."

Judith feigned innocence. "He invited me here!"

"Did he now?" Ivy arched a brow. "Go to bed. Mr. Morris and I will keep this to ourselves." She turned back to look at Charles for his confirmation and assistance, but he was falling asleep standing in the doorway, his head leaning back against the frame. A lot of good he was doing her at the moment. "And you best not tell anyone of this late-night encounter, with or without embellishments, or I will be sure to tell my own side of the story, which will not look good on you — especially as you and I are such close friends and all."

Judith changed tactics, walking over to Ivy now, holding her hands out to her. "Don't you understand? That is why I did this, to show you what kind of man he truly is."

"I'm guessing you did this because you didn't like to be proven for who *you* truly are," Ivy said wryly. "It's time to leave. For both of us. I'll leave Everett in the... uh, capable hands of Mr. Morris here."

She pinched Charles' arm, and he jumped as he let out a snort that woke himself up, then looked around from one side to the other as though he had forgotten where he was. "Right, right," he said, even though he obviously had no idea what he was agreeing to, but seemed

to understand from Ivy's expression that he didn't really have any other choice in the matter.

Ivy led Judith out of the room, taking one more glance back at Everett, who was just pushing himself up in the chair. She thought about it once more before turning around and crossing the room, placing a hand on his cheek as she took a good look at him to make sure that he would at least make it through the night. Satisfied, she nodded, then leaned in, holding his chin between her thumb and forefinger.

"You and I will have a lot to discuss in the morning," she murmured, even while knowing that he would never remember their conversation, nor perhaps anything that had happened tonight. But no matter.

"Goodnight, Mr. Morris," she said before marching out, shutting the door behind her, relieved to find Judith had disappeared. There was much she would like to say to her, but she was far too tired. Safely on the other side, she sighed as she closed her eyes and leaned her head back against it. Everett Pine was proving to be a lot more trouble than she had ever imagined. She just didn't know what she was supposed to do about it.

It wasn't until late afternoon the next day that Everett even felt like leaving his room. Spirit woke him up early in the morning, but Phyllis took pity on Everett and opened the door enough for Spirit to run out. Everett had enough energy to lift his head and look out the window to see Spirit running free, as Everett wished he could currently do himself.

He groaned as the afternoon sun hit his eyes. Spirit had returned and at movement from Everett, he was instantly up next to him, his nose on Everett's arm. He had hoped that more sleep and a few cups of coffee would make him feel more like himself, but he was afraid that this particular illness might take another day to be rid of.

When he finally did emerge, it was only to go down to one of the parlors where he wouldn't be disturbed.

He couldn't remember the last time he had drank so much — probably when he was a young man in school, or perhaps when Jackson had first betrayed him and made him look the fool.

He could hardly remember much of what had occurred beyond the chess game when he had soundly beaten Jackson. Somehow, he had made his way into bed, although he had awoken in his shirt and trousers from the night before.

He was a disgrace. His family had practically disowned him, and he would never be here if it wasn't for his mother, who still loved him even if she didn't completely believe in him. With his father's lack of denial of Jackson's claims, his career was well and truly ruined, especially now that the entire house party had heard the accusations while his father had simply sat there and allowed them to happen.

Then there was Judith. He rubbed his eyes as he tried to recall the memories, as much as he would have loved to forget them and never look back. He had to know just what had happened, how much Ivy had seen, and what she had assumed from it. He remembered her presence in his room but not much else.

Thankfully, Charles soon entered, much to Spirit's delight, and told him the entirety of it, causing a few hazy memories to return.

"Oh no," Everett moaned, sinking his head into his hands.

"I wouldn't worry too much," Charles said with a shrug. "Miss Northrup did not seem to be overly disturbed by it."

"So what does that mean?" Everett asked, running a hand through his hair. "That she doesn't care at all about me?"

"Well," Charles said, lifting his hands, "I cannot say that my memory is completely clear either. But my impression was that she believed that you hadn't done anything, that it had all been Lady Bradley's doing."

"It was!" Everett burst out. "One moment I was stretched out in the chair, ready to pass out into sleep, and the next she was there on top of me. When her lips hit mine, at first I thought it was Ivy, but at least I came to my senses soon enough to realize it wasn't her."

"Well, I'm confident that one conversation with Miss Northrup will be enough to explain to her what happened."

Everett leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, distractedly reaching out a hand to pet Spirit as he did so. "That's the thing, Charles... I don't know if I should."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Charles asked, crossing one leg over the other, furrowing his brow.

Everett could still smell the alcohol on himself, and it was making him sick. "I have nothing to offer her. If my career was struggling before, now it's downright ruined. We live in a run-down boarding house. My father has all but disowned me. She's better off without me. Not that we actually are anything to each other, but—"

He stopped when Charles snorted. "Who are you trying to fool? Yourself?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Anyone with eyes can see how much the two of you want one another. It's why Lady Bradley was all over you, anyway. Because she's an evil bitch who is jealous of the woman she calls a friend."

"Morris!"

"Well, it's true, and it's time you understood that and were happy. Would you be happy with Miss Northrup?"

"I—" He rubbed his brow. "Of course, I would. She's the most amazing woman I have ever met."

"Do you love her?"

Everett squeezed his eyes shut, willing back the emotion that he hated to feel, but as soon as Charles asked the question, he didn't need to think. He *knew*. "I do."

"Well, then, you know what you have to do."

Charles was right. He knew exactly what he had to do.

IVY WAS TRYING to be patient. But that wasn't exactly a virtue she prided herself in, and she only had so much to last her.

By early afternoon it had run out, and she went to search out Everett. She was well aware that he hadn't been completely in the wrong, but he had still allowed himself to become so obliterated that he hadn't known up from down and had given Judith the opportunity she had taken full advantage of.

He had some explaining to do — for multiple reasons. She knew that this had all begun as a joke, but she deserved to know just what he wanted from her. She was done with this flirtation, if that was all it was, and it was time he understood that it was not only about what he wanted — that she had her own opinions and at the age of six-and-twenty, could make her own decisions.

"Mr. Morris!" she called out when she caught sight of Everett's friend down the foyer. "Have you seen Mr. Pine?"

"In the parlor," he said, and Ivy worried for a moment when she saw that he was lacking his usual quick grin. "I believe he is awaiting you, Miss Northrup."

"Thank you," she said with a nod. "And thank you for your help last night."

"Of course," he said, before his smile returned, "although I was not much better behaved than Mr. Pine, I'm afraid."

"Be that as it may," she said, "it is always helpful to have a friend in such a situation."

He nodded, touching the brim of his hat as he tipped his head toward the door of the parlor and she followed his direction, taking a deep breath before she pushed open the door.

Everett was staring out the window at the front drive before the house as soft drifts of snowflakes filtered down outside. Ivy wondered if he was recalling the last snow a few nights ago, the one they had shared together. Did it mean anything to him? Did he care?

Spirit left his side, trotting over to greet her, nudging at her fingers with his cold nose, and Ivy ran her hand over his head, taking strength from him. Everett didn't turn at the sound of the door or her footsteps, although she knew that he must have been aware she was there. His shoulders were stiff and high, nearly at his ears, his hands clasped at the small of his back, and for the first time since Ivy had known him, he truly seemed every inch of the earl's son that he was.

Also, for the first time, she realized that while her father was a squire and the magistrate, there was still a great difference in their stations in life. His mother was only considering her because she felt that her son had fallen rather far from his place in life, which was quite a sad thought in itself.

"Everett?" she said as softly as she could, trying to keep the

impatience out of her voice, knowing that it wouldn't help the situation. "How are you today?"

He turned slowly, and when he did, she could see the shadows under his eyes. His hair was rather unkempt, as though he had run his hand through it a few too many times, while his clothing was much more wrinkled than usual.

Then there was the smell of alcohol that cloaked the room, heightening when he had turned toward her.

"If you feel as you look, it must not be very good," she said wryly, to which his stern expression broke for a moment into a self-deprecating chuckle.

"On that, you are correct," he said. "It has been some time since I have so indulged."

"Did something happen?" she asked lightly as she ventured farther into the room, taking a seat on the arm of the blue sofa near the window, closer to him, Spirit lying on the floor beside him, his head on his paws and his eyes on her.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," he said stiffly. "Jackson making accusations, my father refusing to defend me. I should be used to it by now."

"I don't think betrayal is something that a person ever gets used to," she said carefully, to which he nodded.

"Speaking of which, I suppose you have questions on what occurred last night in my bedroom."

"What happens in your bedroom is your own doing," she said, even though she very much wanted it to be her business.

"But somehow you came to be there anyway," he said, and Ivy looked down, feeling somewhat chagrined. But she had come this far. Perhaps it was time to say what was on her mind and her heart. After all, what did it matter? He would be gone in a few days anyway, and she had a feeling that he was never to return. She took a breath.

"Everett," she said slowly, tilting her face up toward him, "what has our time together meant to you?"

"It's been fun, that's for certain," he said with a smile that, after getting to know him better, she realized was forced.

"It is fun when we are together, yes," she agreed, as her fingers twisted into the fabric of her skirts, her words rushing out as she forced herself to say them before she lost all of her nerve. She knew this was not done, that no respectable woman would proposition a man like this, but then, Ivy had never done what was expected of her in the past and she wasn't going to start now. "But... for you... is there anything more? I know you are not a man who envisioned himself married or even courting a woman, and I tried to remind myself of that. However..." Now the words that had rushed out led to

lost ones, for once she said the rest there would be no going back. She swallowed hard. "I find myself imagining more with you. At first, I thought it was desire, but I... well, I think we could be happy together. For the rest of our lives, actually."

She found she couldn't look at him now once she finished, her pulse beating rapidly as she breathed in and out once. Twice. Three times. Why wasn't he saying anything? He should certainly be saying something now. Shouldn't he?

Finally, she looked up, finding that he was staring at her, his blue eyes wide, clear, but with no hint of what he was thinking.

"Will you say something?" she asked, her voice now just above a whisper, as though all of it had been used in saying what she had needed to say.

"Ivy."

Was that all he was going to say? Was that pity in his voice? Desire? Despair?

"I cannot answer you," he finally said.

"What do you mean?" she asked, more accusatory now.

"You never gave me the chance to tell you what happened last night."

She waved a hand in the air. "I already know what happened. There is no need to explain. You got drunk. Too drunk, but everyone does now and again. Judith used that to try to take her advantage. Whether she was getting revenge on you or proving a point to me or both, I don't really know, but I know that you had nothing to do with her actions."

He kept standing there, staring at her, and the more he kept silent, the more the panic began to ball up in her stomach and rise through her chest.

"That is what happened," she said, as though stating the fact would make it true.

"Judith cannot take the full blame. I welcomed her."

Ivy wondered where all of the blood in her body was going, for it seemed to be draining from both her head and her heart.

"What are you talking about?"

"You interrupted before anything could happen, but I invited her in."

"Why?" Ivy burst out as she pushed herself to her feet. "Why would you say such a thing?"

"Because it's true."

"But... why would you do that with her?" She hated the break in her voice.

"Why not?" He shrugged. "I am an unattached man. I can do what I please, can I not?"

“But—” Ivy began, gesturing out toward him with her hands, but the truth was, he was right. “Do I mean nothing to you, then? Was this all a game?”

“You are a wonderful woman, Ivy, and I am glad we spent time together,” he said, lifting his hands. “But you are right. You always knew that I wanted nothing more from this or from you. I will be returning to London shortly, and I will be returning alone.”

It seemed as though the world was spinning around her, and Ivy placed a hand on the back of the sofa to keep herself upright.

“I see,” she said through tight lips. “Very well. If you will excuse me.”

She turned before he could see the tears that were pooling in her eyes, rushing away nearly blindly, the room blurring as she tried to find the door. The moment she exited, she raced down the corridor, past a shocked maid, picking up her skirts in one hand as she fled up the stairs, needing to be alone, away from any prying eyes — most especially his.

She didn’t know if she was more hurt or angry, but one thing was for certain — in this moment, she hated Everett Pine just as much as she loved him.

Everett stared morosely out of the window of the library. His gaze now and then strayed toward the fireplace — Ivy's "corner," but then the moment he saw the evergreen boughs and strings of garland and berries they had placed together, each in their own practical way, he wrenched his eyes away. Why he had come into this room, he had no idea. He supposed it was the draw to feel close to her, even though they were still within the same house as one another. The thought of seeing her again after what he had just done to her was tortuous, but he deserved it, knowing that she was likely feeling all the worse.

He only wished that she hadn't confessed her feelings to him right before he had broken her heart. He had hoped that it would be an easy goodbye, that she had only been interested in having some fun.

But no. She had wanted more, wanted something that he couldn't give but yearned for just as desperately. Telling her that he had betrayed her with Judith was the worst thing he could have possibly done. But it was also the only assurance he had that she wouldn't pursue more with him.

Because the truth was, of everything that drew her to him — her irresistible, impish grin, her quick wit, her easy laugh, her kindness and openness to anyone and everything around her — nothing meant more to him than the fact that she had believed in him.

If any other woman had walked into the scene last night, she would have assumed the worst, would have accused him of womanizing, of betrayal, of thinking nothing more of women than the pleasure they could provide. But not Ivy. No, Ivy hadn't even required an explanation. She had trusted him and his intentions before she had even heard his word.

That trust — which no one save Charles had ever provided him before — was all he had ever wanted.

And he had thrown it away.

He reminded himself that he had done it for her, that he had sacrificed this in the moment so that she could move on and have a better life — for anything could be better than one that included him.

Everett cocked an ear when he heard the latch of the door open

behind him, cursing his heart for hoping, even for a moment, that it was Ivy. But of course it wouldn't be her. She had too much pride to return to a man who had treated her as he had.

"Everett Pine. You're still here."

Everett closed his eyes as he sighed. Benjamin Jackson. What the hell did the man want from him now?

He decided to ask him, saying those very words, to which Jackson snorted.

"Nothing. I want nothing from you."

"So you're here to do what — to gloat? Haven't you done enough of that already? It's been made very clear that your word means more than mine — even to the ears of my father. You have ruined my career to the best of your ability, but let me tell you something. You may have knocked me down once or twice, yes. But I will not let you win. I may never become the barrister my father wanted me to be, no. But forging a career for myself is nothing to be ashamed of, even if it is as a solicitor."

Jackson snorted. "You have many words, Pine, but you have nothing to substantiate them. It doesn't matter whether you want to be a barrister or a solicitor or a bloody shoeshine. One word from me and any clients you do manage to assemble will abandon you."

Everett shook his head, his pity for the man nearly matching his hatred. "Do you have nothing else that demands your attention besides seeking revenge against me? That's rather sad, in my opinion."

"You're nothing but a spoiled, selfish, privileged scoundrel, who doesn't know how to show gratitude," Jackson sneered. "You had everything prepared for you — handed to you. And you threw it all away."

"You have no idea what you're talking about," Everett said, shaking his head, even though he recognized part of his former self in Jackson's words. "The easy route would have been to follow along with what you asked of me. To allow a guilty man to go free to sin again. Does the power you have been granted mean so little to you that you are willing to throw it all away for a bit of extra coin?"

"It's a good thing that you did not become a barrister, for you obviously have no idea what a barrister does. You represent your *client*."

"Within the bounds of the law," Everett countered. "Besides, had you even met the man who you were defending? Or had you only pocketed his cash?"

"Does it even matter?" Jackson asked, waving a hand in the air. "He is one of thousands, Pine. It is the way the world works. The sooner you come to understand that, the better off you will be."

"And somehow you feel that it is up to you to teach me that lesson,

is it?"

"I don't care what lessons you learn anymore," Jackson countered, "as long as you understand that going against me was your biggest mistake of all."

"You are despicable."

"Yet you are the one disowned by most of your family. And now I have heard that even that little tart of yours has decided that you are not worth her time."

A growl rose in Everett's throat. Jackson could say what he wanted about him, do all he could to try to take revenge against him, but he didn't ever want to hear Ivy's name on the reprehensible man's lips. He advanced toward Jackson, finished with words, deciding he was much better off showing the man just what he thought of him instead.

For a moment, a panicked look crossed Jackson's face — until a voice from the recesses of the room, beyond the bookshelves stopped them both.

"Enough."

There obviously truly was a first for everything, for Everett and Jackson shared a look of surprise before they both turned to the back bookshelf, which was hiding the man beyond it — until after a few footsteps, he appeared.

He was holding a book in his hand, and he carefully placed a marker between the pages before he closed the book, placed it under his arm, and then looked up at them, clasping his hands in front of him.

"Well," he said, his face expressionless with no sign of what he was possibly thinking, "this room is full of pages and pages of more information than a man could ever want, and yet never did I believe I would be so enlightened as I was this afternoon."

"How long have you been here?" Everett asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

"For quite some time now — long before you entered, son," he said. "However, I was enjoying myself and I didn't want to disturb you."

For the first time, Everett wondered whether his father was just as hesitant at seeing and speaking to him as he was with him.

"And then Jackson came in, and I found myself... intrigued by your conversation."

He turned to his long-time friend now, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly.

"You lied to me," he said, his words practically a growl. "And you ruined my son's life."

"Now hold on," Everett said, holding up a hand. "I wouldn't say that my life was *ruined*. I have created a perfectly good life for myself

and—”

“Be that as it may,” his father said, holding up a hand to stop his protest, and Everett rolled his eyes. Even while defending him, his father had to have the upper hand and the last word. But he let him continue, for it was the first time his father had said anything to defend him in a very, very long time. “I believed you, Jackson. Over my own son. I haven’t spoken to him in over ten years.”

Which actually said just as much about his father as it did about Jackson, but Everett let that lie for the moment.

Jackson shrugged. “I never lied to you. He didn’t do as I asked, made me look the fool in my own courtroom.”

“What did you ask him to do?”

“Yes, Jackson, what did you ask me to do?” Everett asked, leaning back against one of the marble pillars in the room, enjoying watching the show in front of him. It likely wouldn’t change anything in his own life, but seeing the two men who had never believed in him square off against one another was actually entertaining.

“My client needed a little help to prove his innocence,” Jackson said, his lack of remorse rather telling. “My job is to help and so that’s what I did. Or at least tried to do, until your son grew some kind of moral compass that kept him from doing my bidding.”

“What can I say?” Everett said, a slow grin spreading across his face, “my mother raised me with rather excellent morals.”

His father raised his eyes heavenward at that, but Everett didn’t overly care. He was who he was, and the fact that his father had finally learned and believed the truth wasn’t going to change anything. There was still a reason his father hadn’t believed in him in the first place, although Everett could finally recognize how his own actions had played into that.

“Regardless,” Lord Walsingham said, looking from one of them to the other, “you both allowed me to believe a lie.”

“You never asked me for the truth,” Everett said with a shrug as though it was nothing of consequence. “If you refused to believe anything to the contrary of Jackson’s words, I wasn’t going to try to force it upon you.”

His father stared at him for a moment in stony silence before finally turning to Jackson, eyeing him with utter contempt.

“Get out of my house.”

“Walsingham,” Jackson said with astonishment. “It’s winter. And it’s Christmas!”

“Yes, but I invited you here under false pretenses,” Everett’s father said. “I now rescind that invitation.”

“Come, now,” Jackson said, his voice taking on an oily smooth tone. “This is unreasonable.”

“You will leave,” his father said, ice seeping into his words, “as you are no longer welcome here — now, or any other time. You will also do everything in your power to repair my son’s reputation.”

“I would look a fool,” Jackson countered, gesturing wildly, but Everett’s father drew himself up to his full, regal height, his hands in controlled fists at his side.

“You should have thought of that before you decided to blacken my son’s name,” his father said. “If you choose not to do as I have... *requested*, I will ensure that your own reputation will be made quite apparent. Is that understood?”

Jackson swallowed visibly. After a long moment, he murmured, “Understood.”

“Very good.”

Lord Walsingham walked into the corridor and opened the door, calling for the butler, who appeared momentarily. Everett didn’t think he would ever solve the mystery of how Barton always knew exactly where he was needed in a house this size.

“Mr. Jackson will be leaving shortly. Please help prepare for his departure.”

“Today, my lord?” Barton’s eyes widened.

“Right now,” he said icily. “Farewell, Jackson.”

Jackson said nothing in response, only shooting the most contemptuous of glares Everett’s way, as though this was all his fault, before he practically stomped out of the door like a little child, leaving silence in his wake.

Everett refused to break the silence, waiting for his father to do so.

Lord Walsingham stood there, hands clasped behind his back, tall and still, and after a few moments Everett realized that he was holding the same posture and he shook his arms free.

“It seems I owe you an apology,” his father finally said, although he kept his jaw held tightly, pride refusing to allow him to show his complete vulnerability.

Everett chuckled wryly, his father’s words a bit of an understatement.

“You know the truth now,” he said, “but to be honest, Father, it doesn’t make much of a difference. You could have learned the truth years ago, but you chose not to. You chose not to believe in me.”

“You had given me many reasons not to,” his father said, and Everett paused, not wanting to hear his excuses, but somewhat understanding them.

“I realize that, and I am sorry for what I put you and Mother through. But I am your son and that should have been enough,” he said. “Even Mother believed Jackson, but she still supported me, still acknowledged me. You threw it all away.”

“I did,” his father said, dipping his head. “And there is truth to your words. I’m a proud man, Everett, you know that. I didn’t want the family to suffer the consequences of what I thought were your actions. It’s not just about you or about me. You have siblings as well. I needed to look out for them.”

Everett paused for a moment, unsure exactly what to say to that. The truth was, he hadn’t completely considered his siblings through all of this. Maybe Jackson was right. Maybe he was more selfish than he had thought.

“I never meant to hurt any of them,” he murmured, looking out the windows, noting that the snowflakes were beginning to fall much more earnestly, and he wondered what Ivy was doing.

Ivy. The one person who believed in him, who didn’t care how his actions or even how his reputation might affect her. The person he had pushed away.

But if his father could defend him now, what had stopped him all of those years ago?

Everett looked him in the eye, seeing something there that he had never seen before — desperation.

“I am glad that you know the truth, that you believe the truth, even if it took hearing it from Jackson’s mouth to do so,” he said. “I cannot say for certain that anything is going to change. But I do love my family, and I would appreciate the opportunity to spend more time with them.”

“Of course,” his father said, with a formal dip of his head. “You are welcome any time. And I would be happy to contact another barrister to help—”

Everett held up a hand. “No thank you. I will make my own way in the world. Which includes working as a solicitor. I actually take pride in building my own life.”

“Very well,” his father said, and Everett wondered if that was admiration in his gaze. “It’s Christmas. I am glad you’re here. While I know that it doesn’t make up for the past, I do promise that I will do what I can to ensure that your reputation is restored.”

He held out a hand, which Everett stared at for a moment before reaching out and taking it. He might not completely forgive him — at least not yet — but the Earl of Walsingham was still his father and, as he said, it was Christmas, after all.

As he shook his father’s hand, his eye was caught by the fireplace, and he knew that he had apologies of his own to make.

He might not be able to offer Ivy the life that she deserved, but, if nothing else, he owed her an explanation. He had let her believe the lie to push her away, but he realized now that there was no better answer than the truth.

She had done nothing wrong but believe in him, and he had thrown that trust back in her face.

He nodded to his father and left the room, determined to right his own wrongs.

Even if he had no idea just how to do so.

Ivy stared at her valise, which somehow didn't seem to fit all of the clothing that it had on the way here. Why that always happened, she had no idea, but it was just one more frustration in a long list of them.

She took in a long breath, trying to keep the tears at bay. Never had she been much of a crier, and she had no desire to start now, especially over a man who didn't seem to want her.

She drew a second deep breath. Then a third. Then, just as she thought she had willed everything away, back deep within her, a sob broke from her throat and it all came pouring out — all of the hurt, the anger, the despair that the one man — the only one in all of her twenty-six years — who had stirred anything within her, wanted nothing to do with her.

Ivy sat on the edge of her bed, her legs curled up into her chest as she let it all pour out in uncontrollable tears.

She was so oblivious to everything around her that she nearly jumped straight up in the air when something cold and wet touched her hand.

When she lowered her hands from her face, she found that Spirit had somehow managed to escape his owner's room and pushed open the door to hers. Without invitation, he jumped up onto the bed, sitting next to her with his nose on her shoulder.

Ivy ran her hands over the soft downy hair on the top of his head before turning and wrapping her arms around his solid body, burying her face in the fluff of his neck, taking the solace he offered.

"Oh, Spirit," she said with a sigh. "If only your owner was as considerate as you are."

She wasn't sure how long she sat there with the comfort of the dog, until his tail started to wag, soon followed by the sway of his entire body, and she realized that while he seemed to enjoy sitting with her, he was becoming rather restless. With a murmured thank you, she let him go run out the door as she continued with her packing.

She was glad that she lived only an hour away. Convincing her

parents to leave — or allow her to — was another issue altogether, but perhaps once her mother understood just why she wanted to, she would have pity on her.

Ivy had a feeling she knew what her mother would say, however. Ivy had wanted some adventure, had she not? Well, here she was, having an adventure, and she wasn't exactly happy with it. Maybe she was better off just staying at home and staring out the window as she finished her netting.

Speaking of netting. She looked down at the bed, at the coin purse that she had finally finished. She had no idea what she was supposed to do with it now. She didn't have much interest in giving it to Everett anymore, but then, if she kept it, it would serve no other purpose besides reminding her of her stupidity, of wanting a man who was only enjoying his time with her, having some fun, although not *too* much fun — for his desire for another such as Judith apparently surpassed the flirtation he'd had with her.

And she had not only believed in him, but had practically professed her love for him.

What an idiot she had been.

She walked to the small writing table in the corner of the room, finding paper and dipping the pen in ink before scrawling a quick note, trying to attempt levity within it to make him forget all that she had said to him. Hopefully he would quickly forget all that had happened, would move onto the life he lived in London and think of her only as a fond memory.

Ivy slipped the note into the coin purse and called for Annie, who was in her mother's room. She asked her if she would please ensure that it was delivered to Mr. Pine. As the girl nodded and hurried away, Ivy watched her, jealous that she might have the opportunity to actually see Everett.

Which was ridiculous. Because first of all, she would likely ask a footman to deliver it. Secondly, Ivy had no desire to see Everett anytime soon.

She placed her packed valise by the doorway and went to find her parents, hoping they would take some pity on her.

* * *

HER ALLY HAD COME from the least likely of places — her father. While Ivy's mother had not been pleased with the potential change in plans as she was looking forward to the Twelfth Night party to be held in a few days' time, her father said he had much work to get back to and would be happy to accompany her home. All he had to do was arrange for Thomas to look after Ivy's mother and ensure he returned

her home in due time. Typical for her father and his interest in her life, he didn't ask many questions but took her wish as it was.

Ivy escaped the room before her mother could pester her further, not having any interest in answering her inquisition.

Her father, a man who was timely and true to his word, not one to get lost in anything unnecessary, summoned her but an hour later — an hour Ivy had spent wallowing in misery, wishing that Spirit would come back, but he must have returned to Everett.

Perhaps she would get a dog of her own, Ivy thought. Yes, that is exactly what she would do. It would be one way to break up the boredom of her life, would it not?

Soon enough, she had said a quick farewell to Lady Walsingham, who saw them off with sad eyes.

"I apologize, my dear," she said quietly, for Ivy's ears alone, as she took one of her hands between her silk-encased ones. "If I had known this would not result in an agreeable ending for the both of you, I never would have suggested anything between you and Everett. I just thought — well, never mind that, it doesn't matter what I thought. I hope to see you soon, Miss Northrup, and I wish you the very best."

"Thank you, Lady Walsingham," Ivy said. "It has been a lovely party, as always. I wish you a very Happy Christmas."

In no time at all, it seemed like they were back home, into the quiet house with only their few servants making any noise. Ivy's father soon ensconced himself in his study, and Ivy found herself back where she had started — staring out the window of the drawing room, at the expanse of bare land that did nothing but remind her of what could have been and all that she was missing in her life.

Passion. Purpose. Power to choose a path for herself.

And love.

For she loved Everett. She couldn't help it, even though it only made his rejection of her that much more painful.

She just had to determine, now, how to live for herself.

* * *

TWO DAYS LATER, Ivy had begun to make a plan. If she created enough reticules and purses through her netting, perhaps she could send some of her products to London, where she might be able to find someone to sell it for her. Who, she wasn't entirely certain. There were a lot of holes in her plan, but she was determined to fill them, one way or another.

She was sketching out her ideas one afternoon in the drawing room when her father walked in.

"Ivy..." he rumbled.

Before he could say anything else, she started telling him what she had planned for dinner, but he waved away her words.

"I'm not worried about that at the moment."

"Oh?" she looked up in surprise. There wasn't much else her father conversed with her about.

"Why don't you tell me what you are working on here."

"You want to know what I am doing?"

"Yes."

Surprising, but Ivy nodded and began, explaining that she enjoyed her work, but that it seemed rather frivolous with nothing to do with it.

"I thought perhaps I could sell some of it, hopefully in London, where maybe I could even make a name for myself. I just don't know how to go about doing so."

She looked up at him, wondering if he was going to tell her that she was a fool, that there was no chance for her to do any of that and she should be pleased with her current life and not strive for anything more.

But he surprised her by nodding thoughtfully as he rubbed his thumb and forefinger against his chin.

"You know, that's not a bad idea."

"Truly?"

"Your work is remarkable. At least, I think so, although I do not know much on the subject. Let me make some inquiries. I'll see if I can find a shop that would work with us."

Ivy's mouth dropped open, but at her father's probing gaze, she quickly snapped it shut. "Thank you," she managed, astonished. Her father had always been so involved in his own work that he had never seemed interested in what she was doing. Perhaps it was because her mother had always been so concerned that there hadn't been room for her father to become involved. "Thank you very much," she repeated.

He nodded and began to walk out of the room but paused in the doorway.

"On second thought," he said, and Ivy's heart dropped. Why had he given her such hope, only to take it away? She'd had enough disappointments lately. He furrowed his brow and looked at her. "What is planned for dinner?"

Ivy laughed and answered him, before bending her head and continuing on her plans. She became so engrossed in them that she apparently missed the housekeeper's calling out to her multiple times. Finally, Mrs. Wilson was standing right in front of her. "Miss Northrup? Is everything all right?"

Ivy's head snapped up. "Oh, yes, just fine, Mrs. Wilson."

"You have a visitor."

“I do?” Her heart started to pound. Could it be Everett?

But then a shadow fell over the room, and when Ivy looked up, it was the one person she had absolutely no interest in seeing. Judith.

“Thank you, Mrs. Wilson,” she said, not wanting any witnesses to their exchange, for she had a few things to say to the woman she had assumed was her friend.

The housekeeper dipped her head and left, promising to bring tea until Ivy told her that it wouldn’t be necessary. For Judith wouldn’t be staying long

“Are you alone?” Ivy asked without any other greeting, which Judith seemed to expect.

“Richard is in the carriage outside,” she said. “I asked to come see you alone.”

“Is the house party not ongoing for another couple of days?” Ivy asked. “What about the Twelfth Night ball?”

“Richard thought it best that we leave,” Judith said, her fingers knotting together, “seeing that there was a fair bit of scandal.”

“Oh?” Ivy said, retaking her seat, and Judith took the chair across from her, folding her hands in her lap.

“Word got out that years ago I attempted to trap Mr. Pine into marriage,” she said, tilting her head. “We tried to deny it, of course, but once a rumor begins...”

“It takes on a life of its own,” Ivy finished for her with a nod. “But unlike most rumors, that one is true. While I can take no personal issue in what you tried to do years ago, Judith, I can’t say that it speaks unwarranted ill of your character. Especially when you attempted to repeat it years later, even knowing that I had an... understanding with Mr. Pine. Why did you do it?”

Judith blinked a few times before looking Ivy in the eye. One thing that could be said about Judith was that she was not afraid to back down from a challenge, even if she had no real defense of herself.

“The first time I did it because I was desperate for a husband, especially one who could provide me the life that I sought for myself. As it turned out, Mr. Pine couldn’t have provided that anyway, so it ended well enough.”

“So then, why—”

“Why did I try again? Because I wanted to prove a point, even if it was just to myself.”

“What point could you have possibly proven by what you did?” Ivy asked, lifting her hands to the side in supplication.

“That I was just as desirable as you were!” Judith burst out. “Everett Pine rejected me years ago, but he seemed to want you with such desperation. I convinced myself that it was only the wrong place, the wrong time, that if I approached him again, he would truly want

me this time. I wasn't actually going to go through with anything."

"Which is why you chose the night he was too inebriated to resist?"

Judith bit her lip and looked down.

"There was less chance of rejection that way."

Knowing what that rejection felt like, Ivy could somewhat understand, but it still didn't excuse Judith's actions — nor Everett's.

"Well, I hope you're happy, for you were proven correct. Everett wanted you. And guess what? *I* was the one he rejected. He never wanted me, Judith. We were playing a game, a little trick on our mothers. It meant nothing in the end, and he cared nothing for me. I hope you are happy."

As Ivy spoke, Judith's eyes widened, until she was staring at Ivy as though she had lost her mind.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about what happened the other night. Everett was honest with me — he has that going for him, at least. He told me that he was an eager, willing participant. About all that happened between the two of you."

"But Ivy, nothing happened," Judith said, holding her hands out in front of her. "He was drunk, yes, but he had no interest in me. When I first stepped into his room, he was saying your name. When I tried to further things and he realized it was me there and not you, he pushed me away as best he could. He wants *you*, Ivy. How do you not know that?"

Ivy froze at Judith's words. If there was one thing she knew, it was that Judith had no reason to lie to her.

Which meant... Everett had. But why? Why would he lie when the truth is what would have made her happy?

The realization swiftly washed over her. Because he wanted to push her away. So, he had done the one thing he knew she wouldn't overcome, which was to make her believe that he wanted another. He had said over and over again that he wasn't good enough for her, a fact she had pushed away. Apparently, he believed it even more than she had realized.

"Why did you come here, Judith?" she asked suddenly, standing as she realized what she had to do, what mattered the most.

Judith stood as well, taking that as her cue to leave.

"I came to apologize, Ivy. And to wish you well. I know I am lucky to have Richard, that he has forgiven me. I thought I would ask for you to do the same."

Ivy looked down at her hands. She wanted to say no. She wanted to hold onto her annoyance at Judith, to show her that she couldn't act the way she had and get away with it.

But holding onto such animosity would do nothing for her. She took a deep breath and then let it all out slowly before lifting her gaze and piercing Judith with it.

"I will be honest and tell you that I do not see us ever being friends again."

Judith's lips turned down slightly, but she nodded in apparent understanding.

"However, I do appreciate that it must not have been easy coming here today, and the fact that the entire house party now knows of your past transgressions is likely punishment enough. If Richard can forgive you, then I don't see why I cannot. Now, if you'll excuse me, there is something else I must address."

"Mr. Pine?" Judith said, raising an eyebrow in interest, but Ivy refused to give her any more details. She had lost that privilege. "Very well," Judith said, realizing Ivy had no intentions of sharing anything else. "Good luck, Ivy."

"Same to you, Judith," she said, shaking her head at the woman as she watched her go. "Same to you."

“Are you ready?”

“Almost, Morris,” Everett said to his friend, who was standing in the doorway. “I will speak to my mother, and then away we will go.”

“And you’re sure about this?”

Everett set his jaw. “It’s not forever. I will come back for her — after I have everything settled. Once my life is prepared for her.”

Charles looked at him as though he was about to say something to the contrary before he apparently thought better of it and nodded before continuing on.

Everett’s bag was nearly completely packed, except for one item. He went to the writing table and picked up the coin purse that was sitting upon it, stroking the blue and silver silk as though by doing so he could feel Ivy through it. He closed his eyes, picturing her working on it, netting it with precision. He was in awe of her work, of her focus, and knew that she was a woman who could do anything she put her mind to.

As she had proven to him again and again. He placed the gift in his bag, lifted it himself as he no longer felt any need to impose upon his parents’ servants, leaving it by the front entrance.

He was about to step into the parlor when he saw Barton walking through the foyer.

“Barton?” he called out, one hand on the frame of the door going into the parlor.

“Yes, Mr. Pine?”

“I’m sorry.”

Barton looked from one side to the other as though trying to determine just what Everett had done.

“For the pranks I pulled when I was younger,” Everett said, forcing himself to look Barton in the face, despite the shame that caused him to flush.

“Oh,” Barton said, his eyes wide in surprise. “Th-thank you, my lord.”

Everett nodded at him, unable to stand there any longer before he stepped into the parlor to meet his mother.

When she saw him come through the door, she stood and approached him with arms out wide.

"There you are, darling. Thank you for giving me a few minutes of your time before you leave."

"Of course, Mother."

She gestured to the chair across from her before taking a seat and pouring him a tea.

"Thank you for coming home for Christmastide, Everett. Even if it was under slightly false circumstances."

He couldn't help his grin at the fact his mother was admitting to a lie, although he knew she would never actually describe it as such.

"I am glad that I was able to see you and the family," he said truthfully, and she nodded.

"Were you also pleased with the opportunity to renew your acquaintance with Miss Northrup?" she asked, looking up at him from over her teacup, the expression in her blue eyes innocent, but he knew far better.

"Ivy and I enjoyed our time together, yes," he said slowly. "And we were both aware of the hopes that you and Mrs. Northrup held for the two of us, which actually did draw us together more than anything."

He tapped his fingers against his knee, deciding that he was finished with all of the games and manipulations, and resolved to tell her all that was on his mind.

"The truth is, Mother... I think I could make a life with Ivy. I—"

He scratched his temple, feeling foolish for talking to his mother about this, but deciding to say what was on his mind anyway. He cleared his throat and continued. "I have never felt for a woman before what I feel for her," he finished lamely, as a smile began to bloom across her face.

"Everett!" she said, leaning forward. "That is wonderful to hear."

"But—" He held up a finger before she became too enthusiastic. "I am going to return to London on my own first to better establish myself and my business before I ask her to come with me. She deserves a better life than I can offer her just now."

He mother eyed him rather critically. "Does she agree with that idea?"

Everett began to drum his fingertips again. "Ah... she is not exactly aware of the particulars."

"How did you leave things with her?"

"Well..." Everett couldn't stop fidgeting under his mother's gaze. He certainly wasn't going to go deeper into that with her. "Not well, as it were."

"Everett," she said with a sigh. "I love you, but sometimes I wonder about you."

“Mother—”

“If you want a woman like Ivy to be with you, then you have to be straightforward with her. She is a woman who wants to play the lead role in her own destiny, not be told what it is going to be.”

She was right. Everett knew that. And yet... he was afraid. Afraid that Ivy wouldn't understand, that she wouldn't want him after what he had done, what he said to her. No one had ever had blind faith in him, and he didn't want to be disappointed when that faith turned.

“I will go to her,” he promised — he just never said when exactly that will be. “I will make things right, Mother. I will.”

“Good,” she said, seemingly relieved. “She is a good woman, Everett, and she makes you happy. That is all I ever wanted for you.”

He nodded, rising, unsure of just how to say goodbye this time.

“There's one more thing,” she said, wringing her hands together as she stared across the table at him. “I have to apologize.”

“For what?”

“Your father told me about learning the truth from your conversation with Mr. Jackson. I never gave you the opportunity to tell us the entire story, either.”

“You still accepted me.”

“I did, but I should have known you could never do what he had accused you of. And I have to say, Everett... I am proud of you.”

“Thank you, Mother,” he said, leaning in and kissing her on the cheek so that she wouldn't see the emotion in his eyes. “I'm sorry for everything I did as a youth to cause you and Father to have doubts. Farewell, and thank you.”

“If you change your mind, I would love for you to stay for the Twelfth Night party.”

“Not this year, Mother,” he said with a loving smile. “Maybe next year.”

“I do hope so,” she said, lifting a hand to his cheek.

“Me too, Mother,” he said. “Me too.”

Having said enough farewells, Everett went to find Charles, hoping that the carriage was prepared and ready to travel to Peterborough to meet the stagecoach. When he made his way to the stables, however, he found Charles pacing between the stalls rather frantically.

Frantic was not a usual state of being for his friend.

“What's wrong?” Everett asked, concern rising, and Charles rushed over.

“I can't find Spirit.”

“What do you mean, you can't find Spirit? I thought he was with you.”

“He was!” Charles said, throwing his hands in the air. “Then I turned around and he had completely disappeared.”

“He can’t be far.”

“I’ve looked everywhere, as have the grooms, the stable hands, the footmen — he’s not here, Pine. One of the maids claims she saw him through a window taking off down the hill.”

Everett took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. Snow was beginning to fall and he had been hoping that they could depart before it began in earnest. He tried not to allow himself to panic as well.

“I’ll saddle up a horse and go looking for him,” he said, as one of the stable hands must have heard him, for he started doing just that.

Glad that he was already prepared for travel, at least, he mounted the horse and trotted out into the yard, wondering just how he was going to go about finding his dog. Perhaps he should just wait for him to return. Everett was sure that he would do so eventually, and yet the dog meant too much to him to just leave him out there, especially with the chill in the air and the snow beginning to fall.

Then he caught a glimpse of movement on the horizon, and squinted. Was that Spirit? He couldn’t quite make out what kind of animal it was, but the way the creature was bounding in circles was awfully suspicious. He whistled to the dog, who paused for a moment, his head turning back before he took off, and Everett realized that he wanted him to follow him. As he dug his knees into the horse’s side, he only hoped that the animal could outrun the small legs of his dog.

But stranger things had happened — most especially at this Christmas party.

* * *

IVY HAD ALWAYS ENJOYED her netting, but she found that now that she had a purpose for it, it had become much more of a passion, one she was determined to perfect. She was working on one particular stitch as she stared out the window, when suddenly something caught her eye. Was that — no, it couldn’t be.

But yes, it was him. She jumped up from the sofa and ran to the foyer before throwing open the door, oblivious to the yelp from the startled housekeeper and the cold air that rushed into the house.

“Spirit!” she cried out as the dog ran across the yard before leaping into her arms, licking her face enthusiastically. She laughed even as she cringed from the slobber, as he stood and kept her pinned with his paws on her shoulders. “What are you doing here?” she asked him. “How did you even know where to find me?”

“Perhaps because he knew how to follow his heart.”

Ivy gasped as she looked up, finding Everett in front of her, sitting tall upon his horse, looking every bit the son of an earl that he was.

“Everett,” she said, her heart galloping as she stepped out of the house and took slow steps toward him. “You came with Spirit?”

“In a sense,” he said, swinging a leg over the horse and dismounting, his chin set as he stalked toward her, meeting her halfway. “He led me on quite the chase.”

“He was running from you? But how ever did he find me?” she said in wonderment. “Or was it just coincidence he made his way here?”

“I doubt it,” Everett said with a wry grin. “I think he knew exactly where he was going.”

“Everett—” she began at the same time he started saying her name, while in the meantime Spirit began to circle them as though he was trying to herd them closer together.

“I am actually glad Spirit brought me here,” he said, taking off his hat and twisting it between his fingers.

“Oh?”

“Ivy—” He stopped, shaking his head, as though he wanted to say something else. “I — well, that it is— Damn it, Ivy, I love you.”

Ivy’s eyes widened in shock as the words began to pour from his mouth.

“I lied to you about Judith. I wanted to push you away, didn’t think I was good enough for you. But things have changed slightly and I think I can make a good enough life for you — for us. It might take some time, and I promise you that once I have made a name for myself, I will prove that I can be the man for you. I will go to London myself first and sort it all out, and I hope you will wait for me. I wasn’t going to come to you yet, but my mother told me that I was a fool, and since I’m here now—I’m rambling. Suffice it to say, I promise to give you the life that you deserve, and if you will still have me, I will come back and marry you and—”

Well, that was just about enough of that. Ivy walked up to him, placing a finger over his lips.

“I will marry you, you silly man, on one condition.”

“Which is?”

“We will marry now. We will make a life for ourselves — together. I don’t need you to create a perfect life for me. For I love you too, and as long as we have each other — and yes, Spirit, you too — that’s what matters. The rest will come. It might be hard work, and it might take time, but that’s just fine with me.”

Everett seemed lost for words, but slowly lifted a slightly trembling hand and stroked it over her cheek. His fingers were warm, and they both seemed to realize at the same moment just how cold it was outside, for he opened his cloak and enveloped her within it.

“What’s this?” Ivy asked, lifting a piece of greenery from the

pocket of his jacket.

"It's part of the mistletoe we hung together — where we kissed for the first time."

"How romantic," she said, her lips sliding into a slow smile as she plucked it from his pocket and lifted it over their heads. "Does it still work?"

"There is only way to find out," he said, grinning at her with equal mischievousness as he lowered his head and brought his face to hers.

When their lips touched, it was as though someone had lit the dry tinder of a fire between them, and Ivy dropped the sprig of mistletoe at the shock of it.

With his cloak wrapped around her, his lips on hers, it was like finally coming home to a place where she found love, comfort, acceptance, and adventure — for she knew that with Everett, she would always find the fire she was looking for.

As was apparent by the way he kissed her.

Oh, but his lips were magic. Somehow, their very touch made her knees go weak, and she wrapped her arms firmly around his neck to keep herself upright.

"So," she said when they finally broke away from one another, although they stayed close in their embrace, "do we have a deal, then?"

"I seem to have forgotten what we decided upon."

"That we will marry and make a life together."

"Well, when you put it like that," he said with a grin, "how could I resist?"

"Good," she said, placing one more quick but firm kiss on his lips, "because I love you too, Everett Pine. With all of my heart. And I don't care what you do or where we live, as long as we are together."

"And as for other women—"

"I know, Everett," she said, taking his face between her palms. "I know."

She was about to kiss him once more for good measure when a voice called out from behind them.

"Are the two of you going to stand out there in the cold all day or are you going to come in here, Pine, and ask me for my blessing?"

Everett's eyes widened in shock at her father, who was waving them in before bending to greet Spirit.

"Coming, sir!" he called, and with a laugh, he began toward the house, pulling Ivy firmly to his side — exactly where she belonged.

As it turned out, they did attend the Twelfth Night party after all.

Their mothers, of course, were beside themselves with joy when Everett returned to Cedarworth Manor along with Ivy and her father, who decided that he could pull himself away from his work to properly chaperone his daughter. He was pleased with the match she had made, but as far as Everett could tell, he still didn't entirely trust him.

Which was just fine with him — he could hardly trust himself to be alone with Ivy, especially dressed as she was tonight in a midnight blue gown that dipped low at the bodice, with only small slips of fabric just below her shoulders that showed a generous expanse of smooth silky skin, delicate collarbones, and arms that he longed to have wrapped around him.

Everett's mother was so thrilled that she even allowed Spirit to attend the party, provided that he behaved himself, which so far, he had.

"Everett, Miss Northrup."

They turned in unison from Charles, who had been regaling them with a tale about his win at faro the night before.

"Father," Everett said with some suspicion, still unsure of exactly how to approach their relationship. The threads of mending it had begun to be woven, but Everett wasn't sure if he wanted it to be finished, if he could ever completely trust Lord Walsingham again.

His father seemed somewhat apprehensive himself as he stroked his silvery beard. "I would like to offer my congratulations," he said. "I know we have not had much opportunity to discuss your future since you returned, but I know that the two of you will have a life of happiness together. Please know, that if there is ever anything you might need from me, I would be more than happy to provide it for you."

Everett opened his mouth to decline, but at the touch of Ivy's hand, he realized that his father was offering peace the best way he knew how, and so he halted the words and nodded at him. "Thank you, Father," he said instead.

The guests were taking turns offering music on the pianoforte and a guitar, both of which had been carried into the wide ballroom for the occasion. Everett held out a hand to Ivy and began to lead her through a lively cotillion. When the song turned to a waltz and he pulled her against his body, he groaned aloud, and her eyes flew up to him in alarm.

“What’s wrong?”

He wasn’t entirely sure how to put into words what he was feeling, but she must have read the desire in his face, for her lips curled into a seductive smile of her own — which was one of the many reasons he loved her, that instead of being shocked by many of the thoughts others would disdain, she welcomed them and answered them with her own similar reaction.

She leaned into him, speaking softly in his ear. “When you plucked that piece of mistletoe, did you leave the rest of it?”

“I did.”

“Well, it’s only there for one more night — should we make the most of it?”

He thought his desire had been burning before, but now it erupted into full flame. “Lead the way.”

She took his hand as they weaved through the guests — many of whom had been invited for this night alone — before finding their way to the library. Everett pulled the doors shut behind them before turning to find Ivy staring at the fire burning brightly in the hearth, surrounded by the greenery that was just beginning to show the first signs of wilting.

“Is it hard to believe that it was two weeks ago we met again for the first time?” Ivy murmured, and Everett placed an arm around her and pulled her in tightly to his side.

“It feels like forever,” he said, taking a couple of steps forward with her beside him, until they were standing beneath the bough. “I’ll take that kiss.”

He pulled her into his arms, her lips fusing against his as she sighed into his mouth, and gratefulness flooded through him that this woman had agreed to become his. They had been tested — much of it his own doing — and yet, here she was, still believing in him and the life they could have together. He wasn’t sure that he would ever fully understand her faith in him, but he had at least learned now that it wasn’t for him to question it — not if this was what she wanted.

Ivy’s hands were pressed against his chest, but the more their kiss deepened, the lower her hands slid, until they were toying with the top of his trousers, above the fall.

He tried to tell her no, to shake his head, but he couldn’t seem to tear his lips off hers. Then her fingers slipped below the fall and he

gripped her tighter to keep the world from spinning around him.

She began to back up, taking him behind one of the bookshelves, to where a small sitting area was spread out before the window. The glow of the fire just reached this corner, and Ivy pushed him down into a chair, leaning overtop of him.

He breathed her name as he reached his hands up and cupped her breasts, shifting the fabric of her gown to release the soft globes into his hands, leaving her lips in order to dip his head lower to take one rosy nipple into his mouth. She arched her breasts into him, tilting her head backward as she moaned, and he lavished equal attention on each of them before sitting up, lifting her and spreading her backward on the sofa below him. He drew himself overtop of her, framing her face in his hands.

Ivy looked up at him, her eyes bright and hazy with her own desire, and Everett told himself to just kiss her and have that be enough.

Until she opened her mouth.

“Everett?”

“Yes?”

“I seem to recall leaving you a Christmas gift.”

“You did,” he said, not understanding what that had to do with anything at the moment. “I forgot to thank you for it. Thank you, Ivy. I treasure it — and I always will.”

“Which is lovely,” she said. “But there is one problem.”

“Oh?”

“You never gave me anything in return.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, realizing he hadn’t even thought of it. “I—”

“So, I am going to ask you for something instead.”

“Very well...” he said, instantly suspicious.

“Make love to me,” she said in a fierce whisper. “Now. Here. In this room where we found each other, discovered our love. Please?”

“I—”

“Do you want to?”

“Most desperately.”

“We make our decisions together, remember?”

“I do.”

“Well, then?” She arched an eyebrow, and he found that he had no other choice — her mind was apparently made up, as were other parts of his body.

She practically ripped his cravat off for him, and he unbuttoned his jacket and shirt, although he left them on before settling his weight back upon her once again. He lowered her gown so that her magnificent breasts were before him, and when he kissed her once again, her soft skin pressing against his chest nearly undid him.

He pushed himself up, and when her gaze caught his, he lost himself in the forest green of her eyes under her lids, lowered in desire. He had never thought that he would be the man to commit himself to a woman — especially a woman like this — for the rest of his life, but he knew, deep within him, that he could do anything if he had Ivy by his side.

He was about to tell her so, but then he shook his head. Their time here was limited and there were other rather... pressing matters.

Everett was reluctant to leave her mouth, but was eager to show Ivy just what else his lips could do. He trailed them down the side of her neck, scraping his teeth lightly over the top of her collarbone, loving the way she trembled but then pushed her hips up into his, causing Everett to curse the layers of skirts and trousers between them.

He continued down her body until he found what he was searching for, kissing the swell of her upper breasts before fastening his mouth around her nipple. Her moan caused his blood to pump even harder, and her fingers began to fumble at the fall of his trousers. He took pity on her and lifted his hips before undoing it himself and she reached her hands in, running them along the tops of his thighs, tickling him more erotically than he could have imagined.

Flickers of light that filtered in through the bookshelves danced over her face in a warm glow, and Everett lifted himself up to take her lips once more. He didn't know how long they remained like that, exploring, learning, teasing, tasting, and building up to such a point of desire that Everett didn't think he could take it any longer.

This time when he began his journey south, it wasn't soft or gentle but rather a promise of what was to come. He pushed up her skirts, then used his lips and tongue to explore her from the base of her neck to the inside of her thighs. She was shaking when he lifted his head and moved back up the sofa, but when she reached for his fall once more, he shook his head.

"Not this time, love," he said, freeing himself completely as he positioned himself in front of her, grinning as he watched her roll her eyes at him.

"Why must you be so handsomely charming?" she grumbled before throwing her head back with a sigh. "I don't know if there is anything I love more than that smile."

"We'll see about that," he laughed, settling himself down on top of her, between her.

He moved forward slowly as she parted her thighs, welcoming him in, and groaned aloud when she began to surround him.

Everett watched her face for any signs he was hurting her, but she reached around and cupped his buttocks, helping him in. As soon as

she lifted her hips and thrust against him, he forgot about being careful, about being in his family's home, about the party going on just rooms away from them, or about all that awaited him — *them* — upon their return to London.

He thrust all the way into her, pausing at the top, hearing the pant of his breath coming hard and fast as he fought for control.

"Everett," Ivy moaned, her fingers curling around his shoulders before lifting and twining through his hair.

He slowly, carefully, eased himself out and then thrust in again, and Everett had to close his eyes as he realized that this — Ivy — was what he had been waiting for his entire life. When he assured himself that her expression was only one of enjoyment, he lost himself to the moment, the rhythm, to her and only her. She moaned in his ear, biting his earlobe as his movements became more urgent, and he shook his head at his own earlier foolishness of thinking that he could ever live without her.

Ivy was moving insistently beneath him, and he knew what she wanted, what she would enjoy — she wanted control of her life, so why not in this moment? He gripped her by the hips then rolled over so she was above him, and when she looked at him with surprised, wild eyes, he used his grip to show her how to move atop him. Her shock quickly changed as her lips curled up slyly, and she found her own rhythm as they moved together. Her eyes began to glaze over, and Everett lifted his hand to rub a circle against her center. Her head fell back, and she dug her fingers into his shoulders as she tightened around him before beginning to grip and pulse, and when he knew she was nearly finished he flipped her back over and drove into her once, twice, until his vision nearly blackened with the sweetness of his release.

He didn't know how long they lay there together afterward, the only sound their own breathing as well as the distant murmur of the party from down the hall. But for all Everett was aware, they could have been in a completely different world.

"You know something?" he finally said, and she lifted her head, her eyes still a little dazed.

"What's that?"

"This marriage thing might not be so bad after all."

She seemed shocked for a moment before her brows furrowed and she swatted him on the shoulder.

"You're insufferable."

"But you love it."

Ivy lifted her brows. "I don't mind it. But I love *you*."

"I love you too," he said, placing a kiss on her lips before fixing her bodice and her dress. "And I know you won't ever let me forget it."

When she smacked him again, he grinned, knowing there was one most important thing he could check off his list — his life right now might not be orderly or certain, except in one thing — he had the love of a lifetime, and it was going to be one hell of a ride.

Epilogue

Ivy lifted her face to the sun, smiling when the wind threw salty spray to lightly splash against her face. Her smile grew when a heavy arm gripped her waist, squeezing her tightly. She didn't look behind her, knowing it was him from the musky scent that wrapped around her just as his arms did.

"Are you ready to return?" his voice rumbled in her ear, and she nodded against his shoulder.

"I am," she said, turning around in his arms now, lifting her own and wrapping them around his neck. "Our life in London is a good one — and from everything we've seen, it's going to become that much better."

Everett nodded, the sun glinting off his cheekbones as he leaned down and kissed her, pulling her in closely.

"Was it everything you ever wanted to see?"

"Everything and more," she said. "But you know, as much of an adventure as we had together, I know that there will be even more to be had during a life with you."

He threw his head back and laughed. "That much is sure."

After they had been married in the very same church in which they had celebrated their first Christmas together, Everett's father had provided them with a gift that Ivy would be forever grateful for — a tour of the Continent together. Everett had been astounded, believing that his opportunity to see the rest of Europe had vanished, and Ivy had been thrilled at the thought of seeing not only outside of Peterborough but outside of England entirely.

As much as she had enjoyed all the people, experiences, and cultures she had only read about in books, it had all been that much more amazing seeing it all with Everett.

Everett had been reluctant to accept the money from his father, vowing to pay it back one day, although his father had refused, telling him that it was a gift, and one that he would be insulted were it returned.

"It's been months since we've been in London," she said, tilting her head as the docks approached. "What are you thinking?"

“The truth is, I’m looking forward to building my business,” he said. “If Jackson was true to his word — and he will be after my father’s threats — then with some hard work I should be able to create a good life for us.” He tucked his index finger underneath her chin. “And I can hardly wait to see what is in store for you.”

Her own father had also come through on his promise. Ivy had received a letter informing her that he had sent the work she had left behind to a storefront in London — and they had sold within days and were awaiting more of her designs.

Everett and Ivy departed the ship arm in arm, looking around the docks to hail a hansom — until a familiar voice caught their attention.

“Need a ride?”

“Charles!” Ivy called out as they caught sight of Everett’s friend, his arms crossed over his chest as he leaned back against a carriage, the usual grin on his face.

“What are you doing here?” Everett asked, reaching out a hand to clasp that of his friend, before patting him on the back.

“I heard your ship was coming in today, thought you might like to see a friendly face.”

“Wonderful to see you, man,” Everett said. “How are you doing?”

“Just fine,” he said, “and I’ve some good news for you.”

“Oh?”

“We’ve got clients waiting to see you.”

Everett furrowed his brow. “How can that be?”

Charles shrugged. “Word has gotten out about your repaired reputation, I suppose. It is good to have you back.”

They regaled him with tales on their way back to Everett’s London rooms, ones which Charles told them he had moved out of while they were away.

“Oh, but you didn’t have to,” Ivy said as they walked up the stairs.

“I’m sure you could use your privacy,” Charles said with a wink, to which Everett could only shake his head. “And not to worry — I’m just next door if you need a real man.”

After bidding him farewell with a laugh, they noted the franked letters awaiting them.

Everett began to shuffle through them, asking Ivy which she would like to open first.

“Perhaps the one from your mother,” she said, to which he nodded before passing her one from her own mother, as they opened them at the same time.

Ivy laughed as she looked up at Everett. “I am assuming your mother has said something similar to mine, although perhaps less straightforwardly.”

“Did she suggest we provide grandchildren?”

Ivy laughed. “She most certainly did.”

“My mother has also asked that we come for Christmas this year.”

“Well, of course we will,” Ivy said, turning to Everett, “will we not?”

“As you already know,” he said, wrapping his arms around her waist and dipping his head toward her, “I will go anywhere with you.”

“Even home to your family and a house full of Christmas guests?”

“Especially there,” he said, his voice low and thick, as it always was when he allowed any emotion in, “because that was where I received the greatest gift of all — you.”

Warmth bloomed through Ivy’s chest as she looked up at him, so grateful for all that they had found together.

“Did you remember that I redecorated a bit before we left?” she asked, a shy smile beginning on her lips.

“I noticed, yes.”

“You may have missed one thing, though,” she said, pointing up to the ceiling, and he followed her finger, laughing when he saw what was above them.

A dried mistletoe bough.

“It’s so that every time you walk through the door,” she continued, “you have no choice but to kiss me.”

“I love it because of what it means to us,” he said, the humor gone from his face as he stared down at her. “But you must know, kissing you is not a choice.”

“No?”

“No.” He shook his head. “It’s a privilege.”

And with those words, he kissed her again, reminding her of all she had gained that Christmas — the one she had nearly missed.

She supposed he was right.

Some things were just meant to be. And others were a Christmas miracle.

THE END

* * *

DEAR READER,

I hope you enjoyed reading Ivy and Everett’s story! Every year I look forward to writing (and reading) Christmas stories. If you enjoyed this one, I have a few more to share. Most are standalone novels, but they all contain your favourite Christmas traditions and a happily ever after.

I’ve included the first chapter of Merry Misrule for you in the upcoming pages (or see it [here](#)), and at the end of the book there is a

list of all my other Christmas stories.

If you haven't yet signed up for my newsletter, I would love to have you join! You will receive Unmasking a Duke for free, as well as links to giveaways, sales, new releases, and stories about my coffee addiction, my struggle to keep my plants alive, and how much trouble one loveable wolf-lookalike dog can get into.

www.elliestclair.com/ellies-newsletter

Or you can join my Facebook group, [Ellie St. Clair's Ever Afters](#), and stay in touch daily.

If you are reading this during the holiday season, I hope you have a very Merry Christmas!

With love,
Ellie

* * *

Merry Misrule

She vowed she would never be in his company again.

Until one fateful Christmas, everything changes when two people find themselves sharing a Christmas party and a near kiss under the mistletoe.

Lord Elijah Kentmore has returned home from war just in time for Christmas, only to find that nothing has changed -- except him, who is now a shadow of the man he used to be. Many of his memories of old have fled, only to be replaced by others he wouldn't wish upon anyone. All he wants now is to be respected for the man he has become, instead of the man he used to be.

He does not recognize Joanna Merryton, his sister's best friend, but Joanna has memories enough for both of them. She is still scarred by the pranks Elijah pulled on her all of those years ago and would never have accepted her friend Caroline's invitation to her family's Christmas house party had she known Elijah would be in attendance.

When Elijah attempts to capture the beautiful, mysterious woman under the mistletoe, he is shocked by her dismissal -- and by the identity of the ugly duckling turned swan. Now all he wants for Christmas is to win her over and convince her that he is not the man she remembers. Can he ever earn the forgiveness of a woman he so wronged?

Chapter One

"You said he wouldn't be here."

"I did." Caroline cringed. "And I really didn't think he would be... but he surprised us all. Mother was astonished."

Joanna nodded, attempting to keep her expression neutral. She knew she should be happy for her friend and pleased for her entire family. Lord Elijah had been gone for over two years now, and they had all rejoiced at his early return from the war.

All but Joanna.

In fact, the only reason she was here was because she had been assured that Caroline's brother was still away.

For after the last time she had attended such a Christmas party at Briercrest, she had vowed to never be in his company again.

She eyed him suspiciously now from across the drawing room, where he sat in a giltwood Hepplewhite armchair, his eyes dark and heavy lidded, but she wasn't tricked by his nonchalant pose. He had a smoke in one hand, a drink in the other, a smug smile on his face. Typical, she thought with a snort, turning around to find her friend looking at her with both pity and apprehension.

"I know he wasn't the... nicest to you, Jo, and I have apologized more times than I can count. But he's really not a bad sort."

Caroline stared at her imploringly, as though she was hopeful that Joanna might change her mind.

She was not to be appeased.

Joanna raised her eyebrows. "Caro, because of him I refused to come visit your house for five years. Because of him I lost my most cherished possession left to me by my grandmother. Because of him, I came to dread Christmas."

"I know, Jo, I do," Caroline said, placing a hand on Joanna's arm as she cast her eyes downward. "I'll make him promise to behave himself."

"Because he always listens to you?" Joanna said wryly, knowing she wasn't being fair to her friend, but unable to stop herself.

"You make a point." Caroline sighed, running a hand over her hair, the same sinfully sweet chocolate as her brother's. "I promise to do my very best, however."

Joanna sighed, attempting a smile, but nearly failing, as she couldn't help but allow her gaze to wander across the expanse of crimson and gold Wilton carpet once more.

The worst of it all was that Lord Elijah Kentmore was just as handsome now, if not more so, than he ever was. Five years had aged him to near perfection. His skin had a touch of tan, passed down from

an African grandmother, his hair dark with curls that had always made her wonder whether or not they would wrap perfectly around her finger. She wished she didn't know that his eyes were a beautiful shade of brown, with a navy circle around the outer edges.

But she did. She knew it all. And she hated him for how perfect his cheekbones were, how chiseled his jaw, how sensuous his lips that were always curled into that smile that beckoned, telling her that if she were to ever tempt herself with his sweetness, he would show pleasure of the highest order.

But that was exactly what had brought about her downfall years past. She was older now, more knowledgeable, and aware of just how he used his charms of seduction for mischief.

She would not be fooled again.

Just then, he turned, catching her eye, noticing her stare, and she jumped in shock, quickly snapping her gaze away to rest upon the flicker of the candlesticks over the fireplace before berating herself for her cowardice. Why should she be ashamed for staring? Everyone else was. She had good reason to.

She held her chin high as she turned her face back toward him proudly, as though she had nothing to hide.

And then he winked at her.

Joanna's chin dropped open in shock at the action for just a moment, but when he smiled smugly she promptly lifted it once more before turning away, now frantically searching for an escape. Seeing no conversation she had any wish to join, she decided instead that now would be a good time to give herself a tour of some of the front rooms of the house, to see what, if anything, had changed since her last visit to Briercrest Manor.

The skirts of her red silk drop-front gown, still one of her favorites and yet sadly a few years out of date, swished as she walked swiftly down the corridor, away from the drawing room that held tonight's musical entertainment.

The door of the library was cracked just a bit, and she pushed it open and stepped through, finding the room inviting with its warm fire blazing, the steady, solid bookshelves stacked from floor to ceiling, filled with the finest of tomes. She longed for a library like this, one which required a ladder to reach to the very highest shelf.

But at the moment, she was just lucky to be able to make it to the circulation library and borrow a single title.

The room was the same. Everything in the house was the same, it seemed, except her. She was the one who had changed. She sighed and turned to leave the room, but upon reaching the doorway, she came to an abrupt halt.

For there, blocking her exit, was the very man she was attempting

to escape.

* * *

“WELL, well, what — or should I say *who* — do we have here?”

Eli wasn't entirely sure who this woman was, but his sister had only a few close friends and was not prone to making new ones. He had seen Caroline conversing with her, and was instantly captivated by the woman, her striking features catching his eye from where he sat scanning the room from his corner.

He was attempting nonchalance, but the truth was, he felt much safer in the corner — where he could pretend to be the man he once was and not who he had become.

He had left England as Elijah Kentmore, charmer, schemer, practical joker.

The war had turned him into someone else entirely — someone, he was sure, this room of revelers were not yet ready to meet.

He found drinking a few cups of his father's fine port helped bring back his former self, removing the layers that had been added through his years at war.

He hadn't tried using women yet to do so, but he figured this one would do as good as any for experimentation.

She, however, did not seem entirely convinced.

“Did you follow me?” she asked, her green eyes turning stormy, but he enjoyed the fire emanating from them, even if it was an angry fire and not an amorous one.

“Would you like me to say yes?” he asked, flashing her a grin, but she was unmoved.

“I'd rather you didn't,” she said, her mouth set into a grim line — a mouth of pretty pink lips that he would love to taste.

“Do you know where you're standing?” He quirked an eyebrow, a look that always worked with women — but it seemed this one was immune to his charms.

“In the doorway of the library,” she said, unimpressed.

“And underneath the mistletoe.”

“I am not,” she said stonily, but then, after twitching a couple of times as she seemed to attempt to rein in control, she couldn't help herself. She looked up.

If her countenance could have grown grimmer, then it did.

She crossed her arms over her chest, squeezing the bodice of her gown — and her perfectly formed breasts — closer together.

Eli tried not to look. But he wasn't that good of a man.

His head dropped. So did her lips.

He had never seen a frown so somber, and he yearned to turn it

upside down.

He leaned in closer to her. She leaned back. He stepped inside the door. She stepped back.

"It doesn't seem as if we are standing under the mistletoe any longer," she said. "And in fact, it could be argued that it was you who was doing so — not I. Now if you'll excuse me—"

"Who are you?" He couldn't help himself. He needed to know.

She stared up at him, her brows lifting and her eyes widening before she peered closer at his face, pausing for a beat. "You're serious."

"How could such a question be asked in jest?"

Her lips parted in surprise. "You don't know who I am."

Why did she say it like a statement instead of a question? He searched her face. *Should* he know her? He supposed there was something familiar about her — but he couldn't quite place her.

"Err—"

"Unbelievable." She snorted, shaking her head.

"My apologies," he said, doing his best to show how contrite he really was, "but since this is a new acquaintance for one of us, perhaps we should start off on a right note."

He picked up her gloved hand, raising it, pressing his lips to it before she wrenched it away.

"Lord Elijah Kentmore."

"I don't think—"

He swiftly stepped toward her, wrapping an arm around her back and dipping his head to kiss her before she could protest any further — they were below the mistletoe, after all — but before his lips touched hers, she ducked underneath his arm and was on the opposite side of him.

"What do you think you are doing?" she asked, two splotches of red appearing on her cheeks. He wished they were from desire, but he came to the unfortunate conclusion that they were most likely caused by anger. He scratched his head.

"Well, we were underneath the mistletoe, and—"

She lifted a hand, and he flinched, for a moment anticipating a slap, but instead she held her finger in the air in admonishment.

"If you ever— and I mean ever— attempt to kiss me again, especially without my permission, then you will regret ever coming home. Do you understand me?"

She was rigid, practically shaking with fury, and Eli finally realized that whatever notion this woman held toward him, it was of the very worst sort.

"I understand," he said softly, taking a step back, also realizing just how grossly he had misconstrued the situation. "And I am sorry — for

this, and for whatever wrong I have caused you to suffer.”

For a moment, her anger dropped, but she seemed to steel it back up again.

“If only it were so simple,” she said, shaking her head. “But the fact that you don’t even remember *me*, let alone what happened — well, that says more than any apology ever could.”

He could do naught but watch helplessly as she stormed away down the hallway, her red skirts furiously snapping around her legs.

“Joanna?” A voice called out.

He whipped his head around as he saw his sister emerging from the drawing room, following the unknown woman down the hall.

“Jo—Eli?” She stopped when she saw him, looking back and forth between the woman’s retreating back and where he stood with his hands on his hips.

“Oh, Eli,” she tilted her head as she looked at him with dismay, “what did you do?”

“What do you mean, what did I do?” he said defensively. Why did everyone always think he had done something?

Probably because he usually had. He rubbed his brow, dismayed that nothing had changed here — especially his family’s regard toward him.

“Did you talk to Joanna?”

“Joanna?”

“Yes,” she said, pointing to the red dress that was now rounding the corner away from them. “Did you talk to her?”

“Perhaps,” he muttered. “But tell me — just who *is* Joanna?”

Now it was his sister’s mouth that fell open.

“You don’t remember Joanna?” she asked. “My closest friend, Joanna Merryton? The one who used to spend Christmas with us when we were home from finishing school? The one you tortured?”

“Tortured? I don’t recall ever torturing anyone. I know I played a few practical jokes, sure, but—”

Suddenly he realized just who she was talking about.

“Joanna? *That* woman is Joanna?”

It was his turn to be shocked.

“That can’t be the same Joanna. Your friend Joanna is... well, she was... plain. Pudgy. Pedestrian. This woman is stunning.”

From what he could remember, anyway.

“Yes.” Caroline crossed her arms over her chest. “She is. She is one of those women who took some time to grow into her looks.”

Had she ever. Her pudginess had developed into delicious curves. Her hair, which at the time had always been pulled back into tight braids around her head, now was shiny, sleek, polished. Her green eyes would have previously been hidden by spectacles. Those, it

seemed, were now gone as well.

She had been awkward. Now she was astonishing.

He realized he was still staring down the hallway.

“Did I... did I do anything to her to cause her such disregard for me?”

“Do you truly have no memory of her at all?” Caroline asked, one eyebrow crooked.

She was partially right. He was lacking a few memories, but now wasn’t the time to share all of his failings with his sister.

“Er... they are somewhat foggy. Can you enlighten me?” he asked.

“Well, there was the time you pretended you were going to kiss her underneath the mistletoe and then held out the dog instead while all of your friends watched.”

Eli swallowed hard.

That could explain her hesitancy when he had pointed out where they had found themselves.

“And then there was the time that you placed coal in her stocking, replacing all of the gifts Mother had bought for her — gifts that would have been the first she had received in years.”

“No...”

“But worst of all, was the time when you stole the pocket watch her grandmother had given her, then gave it to Cecily Cummings for Christmas because you were sweet on her. Joanna went to Cecily and begged for its return, but Cecily refused.”

Eli’s own cheeks were warming now.

“I really did all that? Are you sure you’re not just embellishing? I mean—”

“You did,” she said, her eyes narrowing, “and I had to continue to apologize for it. I’m not saying that you did it alone but it was you who perpetrated it. So if you are wondering just why she wasn’t pleased to see you, now you know. The truth is, Elijah, she doesn’t even want to be in the same house as you, and the only reason she agreed to come was because she thought you were still at war. So please, *please*, just leave her alone. Do you understand?”

He nodded.

But he didn’t agree. For he had a new Christmas wish.

To win over Joanna Merryton.

* * *

IF YOU’D LIKE to read more, you can find Merry Misrule on [Amazon](#) and in [Kindle Unlimited](#).

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For a full list of all of Ellie's books, please see

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About the Author



Ellie has always loved reading, writing, and history. For many years she has written short stories, non-fiction, and has worked on her true love and passion -- romance novels.

In every era there is the chance for romance, and Ellie enjoys exploring many different time periods, cultures, and geographic locations. No matter when or where, love can always prevail. She has a particular soft spot for the bad boys of history, and loves a strong heroine in her stories.

Ellie and her husband love nothing more than spending time at home with their children and Husky cross. Ellie can typically be found at the lake in the summer, pushing the stroller all year round, and, of course, with her computer in her lap or a book in hand.

She also loves corresponding with readers, so be sure to contact her!

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